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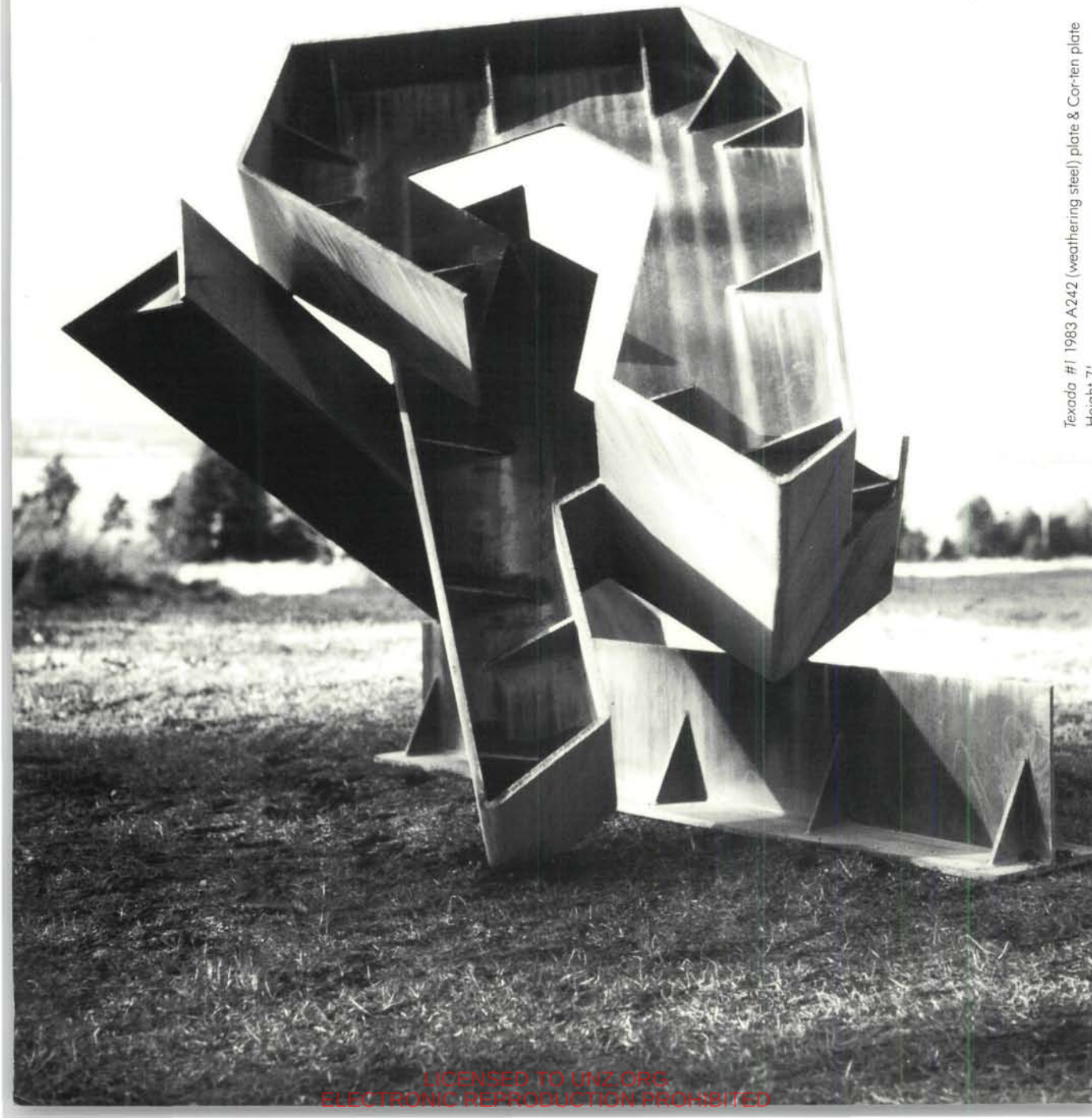

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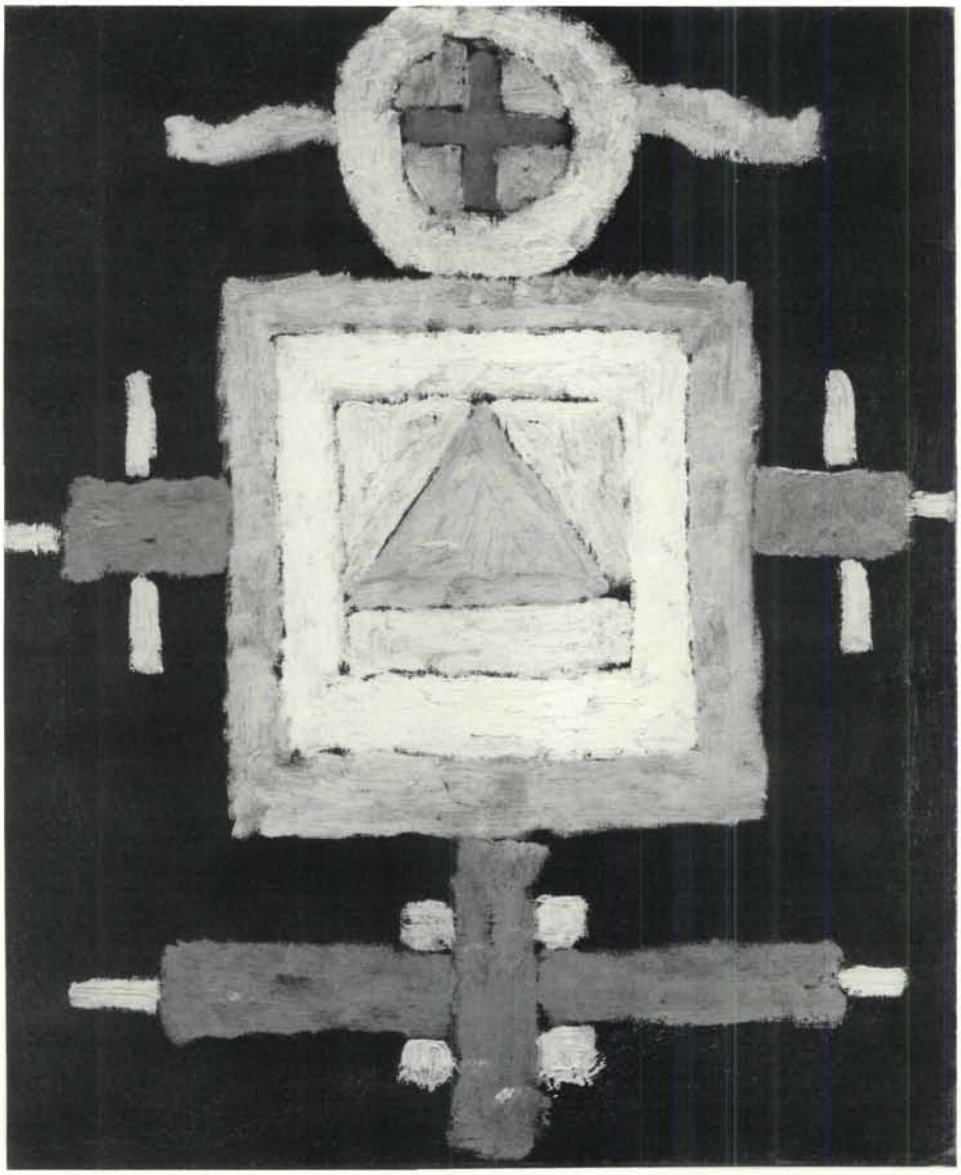

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The New Criterion *September 1986*

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Bruce Bawer's first book, *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Robert Lowell,* will be published this fall by Archon Books.

W. S. Di Piero wrote on Giorgio Morandi in the May issue of *The New Criterion.*

Fernanda Eberstadt, whose novel *Low Tide* was published by Knopf last year, has written for *Commentary* and other periodicals.

Creighton Gilbert teaches art history at Yale University.

Roger Kimball writes regularly for *The New Criterion.* His last contribution was "Debating the Humanities at Yale," in the June issue.

Mimi Kramer is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion.*

Samuel Lipman is the music critic for *Commentary* and the author of *The House of Music.*

John Frederick Nims's *Selected Poems* was published in 1982 by the University of Chicago Press. The epigraph to his poem in this issue, "Water Music," is from Pindar. It may be translated as: "Best [is] water . . . ."

Jed Perl is at work on a book about French art after World War I.

Robert Richman is Poetry Editor of *The New Criterion.*

Donna Rifkind reviewed A. N. Wilson's novel *Gentlemen in England* for the March issue of *The New Criterion.*

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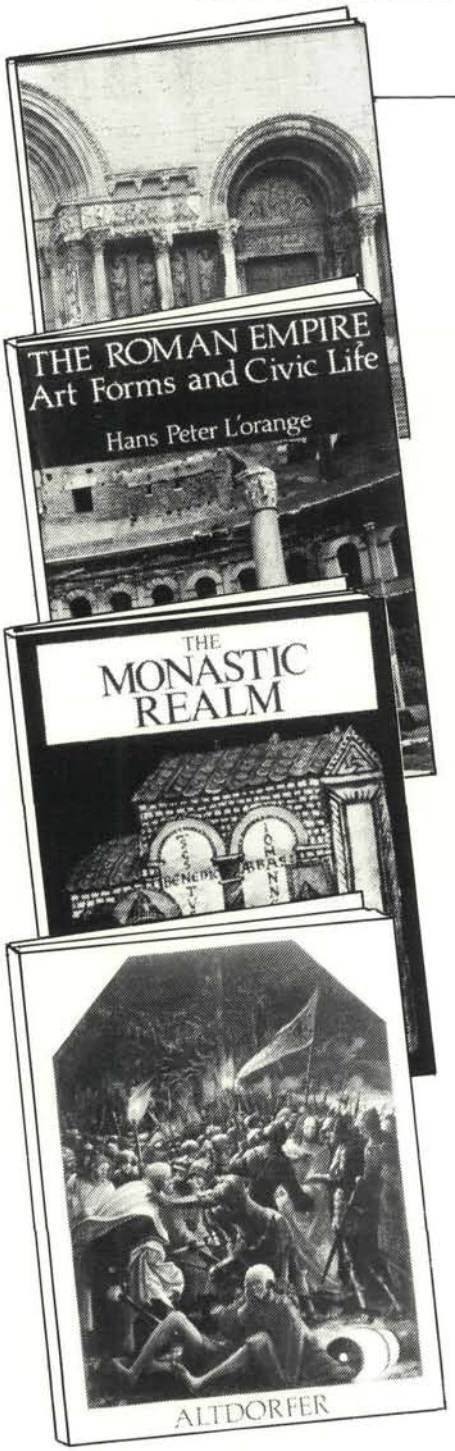

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Anti-Communism and the Sontag circle

by Hilton Kramer

It was to be expected that the collapse of the intellectual Left in France—the virtual extinction there of Marxism and its ideological variants as a source of fashionable ideas—would sooner or later be reflected in the attitudes of those American intellectuals who habitually take their political cues from Paris. The only question that remained to be answered was: What form would this inevitable shift in political attitudes take on this side of the Atlantic? It remained to be seen, too, how widespread the effect of this shift would be when it came. Would it, for example, make any headway in the American academy, or were we going to have to wait for an entire generation of tenured *révoltés* to be retired from the scene before some semblance of intellectual enlightenment could be restored to the American professoriat?

At this writing, alas, the prospect of any significant change in the academy, at least as far as the humanities are concerned, looks pretty bleak. But outside the academy, especially among intellectuals who pride themselves on being culturally chic, the signs are not uninteresting. For in the milieu I speak of—let us call it, for short, the Sontag circle—it is no longer considered *démodé* to be anti-Communist. Indeed, it has become positively smart—sort of the *dernier cri*—not only to be anti-Communist but to be outspokenly anti-Communist. As abject as ever in its submission to French intellectual fashions, this privileged group has seized upon anti-Communism almost as if it were a *new* idea. And, of course, for many of its members it *is* a new idea—new, anyway, in its acceptability and modishness.

They do have a problem, however, and it is not a small one. How can the world be made to recognize that *their* anti-Communism isn't like yours or mine? That it isn't, you know, based on "coarse" or "vulgar" thinking; that it is somehow different, more cosmopolitan perhaps, maybe even sexier, and certainly more refined, than the anti-Communism of people they dislike. Distinguishing themselves from the people they dislike is terribly important, you see, because one of the things they especially dislike about the people they dislike is that they tend for the most part to be guilty of what I suppose must be called *premature* anti-Communism. Which is to say that they were anti-Communist in the days when the Sontag circle was busying itself with missions to Hanoi and Havana and denouncing the white race as "the cancer of human history." Understandably, then, the crime of premature anti-Communism is not one that is easily forgiven in this milieu. For the world is full of simpletons who, knowing little or nothing about the way they order these things in France, might just possibly wonder why it took these smart people so long to discover what so many others, admittedly much less chic than themselves, have long known to be the most important political fact of the twentieth century.

Still, these intellectuals are not without

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their resources, especially when their reputations are at stake. Moreover, the kind of embarrassment and shame which you or I might feel if it emerged that we had been guilty of extolling ideas and praising regimes that were morally insupportable and were clearly *seen* to be morally insupportable at the time—well, that kind of embarrassment and shame is simply unknown to these exponents of cultural chic. They live, after all, for the moment. Yesterday's fashions are easily shed, and when the moment arrives for a new position to be taken, they can be counted upon to be shameless in explaining away anything that you or I would consider contradictory or incriminating. Their sense of their own rectitude remains insuperable, and they never lack for allies to assist them in rehabilitating their claims to moral superiority.

An illuminating case in point is to be found in the remarkable article which a prominent member of the Sontag circle published this summer in *The New Republic*.[1] Written by David Rieff and ostensibly a review of *Against All Hope: The Prison Memoirs of Armando Valladares,* the article is actually a polemic designed to establish the Sontag circle as the true and rightful custodians of intellectual anti-Communism, and thus to distinguish *their* anti-Communism from—what else?—the "vulgar" anti-Communism of the neoconservatives. While hailing *Against All Hope* as "one of the most complete accounts by a survivor of life in a gulag"—Armando Valladares is a Cuban poet who suffered more than twenty years of imprisonment and torture for *his* anti-Communism—Mr. Rieff uses the occasion of the book's publication to offer us instruction in the subtleties of ideological etiquette. In the course of outlining for us what the Sontag circle now deems to be the "correct" form of anti-Communism, Mr. Rieff also attempts to explain how it happened that this group was always right—which is to say, Left—even when it was wrong. And this, in turn, may help us to understand—though this was scarcely Mr. Rieff's intention—why this group is still dead wrong even now when, at least on the subject of anti-Communism, it has at long last awakened to the truth.

Mr. Rieff sets out the terms of his argument in the opening paragraph of his article:

> The love affair between successive generations of *bien pensant* Western intellectuals [he writes] and the revolutionary communist regimes that have come to power since the storming of the Winter Palace is—Marx's inane aphorism notwithstanding—simultaneously a profound tragedy and a gruesome farce. The story is tragic (not simply pathetic) because a passionate hope for a better world, even one that entails a stubborn refusal to despair of that hope, is a moral stance of considerable nobility.

It is daring, of course, for Mr. Rieff to invoke the spectre of those "*bien pensant* Western intellectuals" at the outset, for he is so clearly one of them. Yet that reference to "a passionate hope for a better world" is obviously expected to serve as a guarantee of virtue, and so Mr. Rieff, as *bien pensant* as ever, continues on, perfectly confident of the "nobility" of his "moral stance." He cites George Steiner (writing on Sartre) as having defined for us the "two possible reactions to the awful reality of communism." Mr. Steiner is quoted as follows: "One [reaction] is to say 'Ha! I told you so. What a fool you were to expect otherwise.' . . . The other reaction is to say, 'Damn it to hell! One more great human hope gone to bits.'" Actually, this doesn't begin to exhaust the possible reactions one can have to "the awful reality of communism," and I can hardly believe that Mr. Steiner believes it does. But never mind—with the side of virtue clearly established, Mr. Rieff makes his main point:

> This decent feeling of mourning for a great human hope is what is missing from neoconservatism; though its anti-communism is correct, its way with ideas is coarse and vulgar when compared with the tradition it criticizes.

1 "El Gulag," in *The New Republic* of July 28, 1986.

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There you have it. But what exactly is "the tradition" which neoconservatives are known to be so critical of in their "coarse" and "vulgar" way? About this tradition Mr. Rieff has curiously little to say, and one naturally wonders who, in his view, can be taken to represent it. Lenin? Stalin? Fidel Castro? Pol Pot? There is much to be said about the tradition which these names represent, but I somehow doubt if *their* "way with ideas" is what Mr. Rieff has in mind as the opposite of what is "coarse" and "vulgar." No, he is probably thinking of someone closer to home—most likely Susan Sontag, whose "way with ideas" is so much admired. But if this is the case, then it is surely legitimate—indeed necessary—for us to be given some examples of what it is like to deal with ideas about Communism in a way that is free from the taint of coarseness and vulgarity. One wonders if the following represents the sort of thing Mr. Rieff has in mind:

> All this, myth as well as reality, must be taken into consideration when evaluating the nature of public institutions in North Vietnam and their role in promoting or discouraging individuality. The life of an institution cannot be appraised by examining a blueprint of its structure; run under the auspices of different feelings, similar structures can have a quite different quality. For instance, when love enters into the substance of social relations, the connection of people to a single party need not be dehumanizing. Though it's second nature for me to suspect the government of a Communist country of being oppressive and rigid, if not worse, most of my preconceptions about the misuses of state power in North Vietnam were really an abstraction. Against that abstract suspiciousness I must set (and be overruled by) what I actually saw when I was there—that the North Vietnamese genuinely love and admire their leaders; and, even more inconceivable to us, that the government loves the people . . . . Seeing for the first time in my life a prime minister praising the moral character of his country's people with tears in his eyes has modified my ideas about the conceivable relations between rulers and ruled, and given me a more complex reaction to what I would ordinarily dismiss as mere propaganda.

Or maybe this choice item:

> The people staffing IBM and General Motors, and the Pentagon, and United Fruit are living dead. The revolutionary response can't be sabotage: blowing up the great corporate institutions. We are too few, too divided; and the violence they monopolize is formidable. The answer on which everybody is, miraculously, in agreement is subversion—subversion of the culture which produces the heartless bureaucrats of death and empty affluence: a kind of benevolent science-fiction operation, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* with the Body Snatchers as the good guys. Bending the mind and shaking loose the body makes someone a less willing functionary of the bureaucratic machine. Rock, grass, better orgasms, freaky clothes, grooving on nature—really grooving on anything—unfits, maladapts a person for the American way of life.

Or this one:

> After ten years of revolution—think of what happened in Russia in a similar period—the Cuban revolution is astonishingly free of repression and bureaucratization. (Not only has the Cuban revolution not begun eating its children, as all revolutions are supposed to do according to the received liberal view. Well aware of this famous prediction, it has no intention of doing so.) But American visitors are wrong if they mistake the Cuban energy as being very similar to their own.
>
> The new energies American radicals are particularly devoted to unleashing in this country are those of the individual life-history, of private passion; the energies of outraged selves, cheated by the society of their humanity and their vitality, seeking fulfillment. The analysis of American radicals counsels various kinds of retreat from the rough, dehumanizing embrace of the corporate life-killers (family, school, jobs, the Army) to locate a new focus of energy. For some, this focus is exclusively

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> private, often crudely hedonistic; for more and more people, it is found in new independent communities and families and affinity groups, voluntarily constituted. But in Cuba this perspective does not make sense; indeed it is positively counterrevolutionary. A society in which a revolution has come to power can hardly find reinforcement for revolutionary consciousness in a view which makes "society" the enemy.

The first passage is quoted from Sontag's "Trip to Hanoi," now a classic in the literature of fellow-travelling apologetics[2]; the second and third, from one of her lesser-known essays, "Some Thoughts on the Right Way (for Us) To Love the Cuban Revolution."[3] Of course, one can't be certain that this is what Mr. Rieff was thinking of when he spoke of "the tradition" which neoconservatives are inclined to criticize, but I rather suspect it is.

With the line, then, firmly established—to his own satisfaction, anyway, and presumably that of his editor at *The New Republic*—between "vulgar" anti-Communism and the other kind, Mr. Rieff returns to the history of those "*bien pensant* Western intellectuals" and their defense of Communist tyranny, and, *mirabile dictu,* actually identifies himself, or rather his *former* self, as one of them.

> All those tourists of the revolution [he writes], seeing nothing and approving everything. The repulsive examples continue to pile up, and it is not pure polemic to cite them. For are Beatrice Webb's chirpy accolades for the OGPU so very different from Noam Chomsky's breezy dismissals of the first accounts of the Cambodian genocide? Or were Henry Wallace and Owen Lattimore's bracing gambols through the Soviet slave labor camps of Magadan and Kolyma ("a combination of Hudson's Bay Company and the TVA" was Lattimore's unforgivable summing up) any more intellectually disgraceful than the more incoherent but equally heartfelt gushings—the "right ons," the chants of "Cuba Sí, Yanqui No"—of the young (and not so young) Americans like myself who traveled to Cuba in the 1960s and '70s?

Now anyone who has read Paul Hollander's book, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba 1928-1978,* published by Oxford in 1981 and reissued as a Harper Colophon paperback in 1983, will recognize straightaway that Mr. Rieff is telescoping certain of its details in the foregoing paragraph. What is interesting is not that he should make use of this excellent book but the *way* he makes use of it. For one of the more conspicuous figures under discussion in Mr. Hollander's book is none other than Susan Sontag. On page 353 of the paperback edition of *Political Pilgrims,* one of her remarks in "Trip to Hanoi" is quoted in the same paragraph containing a reference to the Webbs, but in the book as a whole Sontag looms much larger than Beatrice Webb. Sontag is, as you might say, one of the stars of the show. And while it may be gallant of Mr. Rieff to substitute his own youthful political mistakes for Sontag's not so youthful ones in the passage I have quoted, one is nonetheless made a little queasy by the omission—especially when, a few paragraphs further on in his article, Sontag is given a cameo role, so to speak, as one of "a significant number of Western European and North American intellectuals [who] first subjected an act of the Cuban government to intense scrutiny and criticism." That is, she is cited for her activities on behalf of writers imprisoned by Castro but *not* for her own writings in defense of Castro's revolution and the Communist regime in North Vietnam.

This use—and abuse—of Paul Hollander's

2 "Trip to Hanoi" is reprinted in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969). It was first published as a separate book in 1968. *Styles of Radical Will* remains in print, and "Trip to Hanoi" has never, as far as I know, been recanted by its author.

3 "Some Thoughts on the Right Way (for Us) To Love the Cuban Revolution" was published in *Ramparts,* April 1969.

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book interested me for another reason. It reminded me of something I had almost forgotten. About five years ago, at one of those posh dinner parties that people give for writers on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, I found myself seated next to Susan Sontag. As writers tend to do, I asked her what she was working on. Imagine my astonishment upon being told that she was writing an article for *The New York Review of Books* that would constitute a "reply" to Hollander's book. He shouldn't—she said in a tone of moral indignation—be allowed to get away with it. The article, of course, never appeared. No doubt it was overtaken by events—the crackdown in Poland, most particularly, and the increasing influence here of certain émigré writers from Communist countries, Joseph Brodsky among them—which would have made a "reply" to Hollander along the lines originally envisioned somewhat problematical. Instead of this lost reply to Hollander, Sontag presently gave us something else. A year later, in 1982, she made her famous Town Hall speech, declaring that "Communism *is* fascism," which, though it alienated certain die-hards on *The Nation* and *The Village Voice,* nonetheless had the effect of making a certain kind of anti-Communism sort of okay in certain circles. It initiated what might be called anti-Communism's *nouvelle vague.*

But let us return to David Rieff's article in *The New Republic,* for it reads in some respects like the kind of piece Sontag might have written in response to Hollander's book—though Hollander's book is never mentioned by Mr. Rieff. In his article Mr. Rieff attempts to explain why Castro's revolution was seized upon by himself and so many others as the embodiment of that "passionate hope for a better world" which, in his view, is so much to be admired. It turns out that the key word here is "passionate," for in his effort to explain the appeal of Cuban Communism Mr. Rieff resorts, very much as Sontag did in explaining the delights of the one-party system in North Vietnam, to the language of love.

> Surely only the language of romantic love [he writes] (and, at least in the case of Cuba and perhaps Nicaragua, that of Club Med) can account for the phenomenon. This impression is, if anything, strengthened by the degree to which those who have repudiated their radical sympathies have done so using the vocabulary of the disenchanted lover.

Then, to amplify our understanding of the sexual "turn-on" which Cuba afforded its passionate American supporters, Mr. Rieff writes:

> It is important to keep in mind that the degree to which the passion American radicals of the 1960s and '70s felt for Cuba was, in reality, as much an erotics happily ratified by a dialectic as the other way round.

Ah, that wonderful word "erotics"—a favorite in the Sontag circle ever since it made its first appearance in *Against Interpretation.* What would they do without it? Yesterday it was called upon to aid us in grasping "the sensory experience of the work of art"; today it serves to explain the appeal of Castro's revolution.

> There was Fidel [Mr. Rieff writes], bearded and exuberant; but, above all, there was Ché. Ché Guevara was not so much a man, he was a poster—the poster on your dorm room wall.[4] He was a rock 'n' roll revolutionary, Jim Morrison with an assault rifle.
>
> The Cuba of Fidel and Ché . . . seemed like a perfect amalgam of Marxism and sensuality, hedonism and heroism. I can remember walking through the streets of Havana in 1969 and seeming, at almost every other intersection, to bump up against that famous poster of Ché in which, his long hair coursing over an op-art map of Latin America, he appeared to embody

4 This reference to the Ché poster reminds us of another of Susan Sontag's contributions to political thought—her long essay on "Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity," which she wrote in 1970 for a book called *The Art of Revolution: Castro's Cuba 1959-1970,* published by McGraw-Hill.

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> every longing. The legend always read, "We must create the New Man." That was quite a come-on in 1969. When Peter Max meets Malevich, and the Merry Pranksters enlist in the Paris Commune, it can get awfully hard to think straight.

This, I gather, is what it means to write about Communism without being coarse or vulgar.

The question that inevitably arises is: Didn't these people ever read anything about what was really going on in Cuba? Despite all the blather about "erotics," these are people who read and write. They do it for a living, and are expected to know something about the subjects they write about. The truth about Cuba—for anyone who was interested in the truth—was well known long before Mr. Rieff walked the streets of Havana or either Heberto Padilla or Armando Valladares became a literary *cause célèbre* for the Sontag circle. Castro announced in 1961 that Cuba was a Marxist-Leninist state on the Soviet model, and he made no secret of the fact. He broadcast it to the world, and the whole world knew. Moreover, it was a subject much written and argued about—by, among others, Theodore Draper, whose book, *Castro's Revolution: Myths and Realities,* published in 1962, was widely discussed at the time. You could hardly pick up an issue of *The New Leader* in those days without finding one of Mr. Draper's meticulously documented articles on what Castro was up to. It was in the same magazine, by the way, that you could read—if you were inclined to pay attention to such matters—the transcript of Joseph Brodsky's trial in Leningrad in 1964 and what I believe was the publication here of the first translation (by the late Jean Garrigue) of one of Mr. Brodsky's poems, the "Elegy for John Donne." I mention this because, by an odd twist of fate, Mr. Rieff is now Mr. Brodsky's editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

In the Sixties, of course, Mr. Rieff was a kid. But he is a grown-up now (and Susan Sontag was passing for one at the time). Yet he still hasn't a clue to how politics works in the real world. So enchanted is he with his notion of the role of sexual aesthetics in politics that he can write the following passage and still believe he is saying something smart:

> It would be impossible to underestimate this aesthetic and aestheticizing element. (I sometimes wonder whether the contrast between the passionate identification anti-war Americans felt for the Vietnamese and the indifference they so lavishly exhibit toward the Afghans doesn't have something to do with criteria of physical beauty.) Great beauties use their charm to get away with murder. As Fidel Castro has.

When, more than twenty years ago, Susan Sontag called for "an erotics of art," I knew the consequences were likely to be bad, but I little dreamed that this half-baked idea would be adopted as a mode of political analysis. Somebody should break the news to Mr. Rieff: The reason "anti-war Americans" are indifferent to the war in Afghanistan has nothing to do with aesthetics or "erotics." It has everything to do with the fact that American college students stand in no danger of being drafted into fighting that war. And it has something to do, too, with the fact that there is no way the war in Afghanistan can be used to make the United States government, or the country as a whole, look bad—always a key consideration for "anti-war Americans" as well as for the Sontag circle.

The truth is, Susan Sontag doesn't have much of a mind for politics—and neither does Mr. Rieff. They are aesthetes hopelessly in thrall to the winds of fashion, forever in search of the "turn-on" that will serve their narcissism and their self-esteem. We probably owe it to Joseph Brodsky's influence as well as to developments in France that they have now discovered the merits of anti-Communism, and if they have to muck around in matters they don't understand, I suppose it's better for them to be anti- than pro-Communist. But to an understanding of

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the political realities of Communism—or, for that matter, the political realities of American democracy—they have nothing whatever to contribute. Their disabilities in this respect have been amply demonstrated. History to them is not a record to be scrupulously explored but a sort of disco in which to be seen and have a good time; politics is somehow indistinguishable in their minds from the pleasure principle. No wonder they are so bothered by the ideas of the neoconservatives. When it comes to history and politics, this is what Mr. Rieff has to offer us:

> Think of a slogan [he writes in *The New Republic*] like "Which Side Are You On?" the *mot d'ordre* first of American Stalinism and now of neoconservatism. That's not a thought, it's a rock 'n' roll lyric: "Who Do You Love?" in political drag.

In this vulgar and unforgivable equation of American Stalinism, which long supported a system of tyranny and terror, with neoconservatism, which emerged from the turmoil of the Sixties to defend American democracy against the atrocious ideas of people like Susan Sontag, we are given a glimpse of the real spirit that governs this *nouvelle vague*—the preening ignorance, the incurable facetiousness, and the unremitting display of self-congratulatory airs.

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Killing moonlight: the Futurists in Venice

by W. S. Di Piero

One of the most unsettling images in the enormous exhibition of Futurist art now showing in Venice is Giacomo Balla's *The Mad Woman* (1905). The woman stands full length, framed by a doorway, her hair mussed and gnarled. The yellow springtime light shatters on the broad field behind her. Her body is a coil of wrecked nerves, her long form one pulled or stretched contortion, from her flyaway curls to the tensed flex of her foot. She waves a finger in front of her face at the world outside her disordered mind, in a gesture of negation or chastisement, as if to scold or correct us, while her other arm hangs stiffly at her side, hand cocked at an odd angle. In its present setting—in a show called "Futurism and Futurisms," which contains hundreds of paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, books, documents, and assorted paraphernalia from the Futurist movements in several countries[1]—Balla's picture has two quite different effects. Placed in the rooms designated "Towards Futurism," it helps to establish the formal matrix out of which the language of Futurist art was to evolve: the detonated coloring of Impressionism, the phosphorescences of Pointillism, and the tension between documentary fidelity to subject and the irresolutely colored images characteristic of the *macchiaioli* in the second half of the nineteenth century. But the young woman's look of bewildered chastisement also seems directed at the other pieces in the show, as if she were registering real dismay at the carefully scripted derangements soon to be staged by F. T. Marinetti and the Futurists as they assaulted the complacent rationalisms of the past.

Balla was, after Umberto Boccioni, the most gifted among Italian Futurist artists. Like other painters early in the century, he wanted to record on canvas the new industrial expansion that was carving out large pieces of the Old World's landscape and changing the sense of time experienced by workers. The two panels of Balla's *A Worker's Day* (1904) show laborers first on a building site then later returning home on a lamplit street at dusk. Each scene includes a house under construction, where the sign of the new age is the gridwork of woodrail scaffolding climbing high up the sides of buildings. By 1912, however, once committed to a Futurist program, as if by sheer willful self-conversion Balla ceased creating such moody realistic canvases and began to make a different sort of art. About halfway through the current show, one enters a room which I think of as "Balla's Speed Shop." On the walls are the famous series of paintings whose titles are miniature manifestos: *Speeding Car, Abstract Speed, Dynamic Expansion and Speed.* The dominant forms are repeti-

1 "Futurismo & Futurismi" is on view at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice until October 12, 1986. The catalogue for the exhibition was published by Bompiani, Milan (638 pages). It includes essays by Pontus Hulten, the organizer of the exhibition.

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tive quarter moons, scythes, swallowtails, nautilus whorls—all abstract figures sliced across by triangulated planes with other echoing forms revolving and coiling inside. The pictures are from 1913, when Balla was seeking to accommodate the form of motion that was proliferating with spectacular quickness in Western industrial societies—the wheel, in all its manifestations: cars, trucks, trains; pulleys, casters, bearings; the figure traced by aeroplane propellers and locomotive cranks. Balla was the purest anatomist of velocity among the Futurists, analytical, precise, and objective. Some of his early work prepared him for this. The closed doors in his picture *Bankruptcy* (1902) are defaced with scribbled spirals and curves, prefiguring the general Futurist position that the past as a fund of wisdom and static forms was bankrupt, that the artist's only workshop and subject would be the present rocketing into the future. By the late Thirties, however, after a long association with Futurism (he signed two important early manifestos in 1910), Balla came out the other end, declaring that "pure art is to be found in absolute realism, without which one falls into decorative ornamental forms." The curse of the merely decorative was one that Futurism, as this show perhaps unintentionally demonstrates, could never escape.

If *The Mad Woman* was placed for its editorial effect, that would be in keeping with the self-conscious assertiveness of the entire exhibition, which fills the spacious three stories of the eighteenth-century Palazzo Grassi. The "Towards Futurism" section on the ground floor displays items by Edvard Munch, Picasso, Seurat, the Lumière brothers, Georges Méliès, and others who may have anticipated the various strains in Futurist art. The visitor has to infer this, however, and construct his own historical argument, since the catalogue limits its commentary to a brief introduction and a "Dictionary of Futurism." Above the dazzling marble foyer hang a monoplane and single-engine fighter, like profane versions of the Holy Spirit blessing the show and lending it the power of secular evangelism. Off the main foyer are two of the choicest objects in the show, an early model Fiat touring car with luxuriantly funereal black leather seats, and a Bugatti one-seater that looks more like a tin country mousetrap than a newfangled speed machine. Like Futurism, the exhibition is so full of its own energetic theatricality that it cannot quite control its range of reference, which becomes haphazard, and its ironic suggestiveness, which becomes confused and opaque. It is carefully programmed to allow for a generosity of reference and accommodation, to document what the curators obviously believe to be the omnipresent durable effects of Futurism. But like the movement itself, the show's infatuation with its own enthusiasm resolves into a very particular sort of modernist tedium.

The entire second floor is given over to Italian Futurism. While artists like Otto Dix, Mikhail Larionov, Duchamp, Gaudier-Brzeska, and Jacob Epstein might all be tagged as Futurists at some point in their careers, the most influential documents and "events" were produced by Marinetti, and no artist mentioned above can be treated so exclusively in Futurist terms as Boccioni, Carrà, Balla, and Severini. Venice is the ideally ironic setting for the show. In their manifesto "Against Passéist Venice" (1910), the Futurists called Venice the "great sewer of traditionalism," which ought to be purged of all its rotting leftover antiquities and turned into a military, industrial power. They wanted to burn the gondolas ("rocking chairs for idiots") and wrench Venice into a new age: "Let the reign of the divine Electric Light come at last, to free Venice from her venal hotel-room moonlight." The town was already a museum in Marinetti's time, the kind of historical "jewel" loathed by the Futurists because it represented the crippling presence of the past, old achievements enshrined (like Roman Catholicism) to oppress the contemporary imagination. The mastering idea behind Marinetti's pronouncements was that *passatismo* must be attacked and routed wherever it appeared, that the new century was so utterly new that

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art could no longer look presumptuously toward memory as a restorative, innovative power, that artists had to violently revolutionize their methods, choose new subjects, forge a new form-language, if they were to redeem themselves from the wasteful obedience to, and worship of, past forms. All the old poeticisms naturally came under attack. The most abrasive and rudely endearing Futurist manifesto is entitled "Let's Kill Moonlight." In place of the old cautious deliberations, the infinite refinements of sentiment, the laboriously arrived at nuances of representational realism, would come heroic speed, *dinamismo,* and quickened bright metallic facts. The failure of at least part of the Futurist program is bitterly apparent. Venice may be, for many, the island of eternally serene moonlight, but she is, first and always, Queen of Irony, cunning, indifferent, secretive, and greedy. She knows that her gondolas, most of them, are rocking chairs for idiots, but unlike the Futurists she does not care. More a museum than ever before and therefore more protective of her secret life, Venice has now coopted her most virulent critics and is charging admission to view them.

A new form of attention was, at any rate, necessary. The mechanical means of producing images of reality (and of reproducing copies of images of reality) induced a new self-consciousness of the moment's composition in time. In his "Animal Locomotion" series of 1887, excerpts of which are in the "Towards Futurism" section, Eadweard Muybridge used the photographic image to analyze motion by recording its serial instants. One of the images on display is of a nude woman descending steps. When, much later, the coppery turbine vanes of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, no. 2* (1912) enact one Futurist obsession—that of registering the planes through which movement passes—the historical arc is neatly closed. Artists therefore needed to review and revise their awareness of the process of motion and of civilization's new life-altering products. Marinetti—poet, prosewriter, and man of independent means—was the most tireless and best-organized advocate of accommodation. In order to reach the largest audience as quickly as possible, he spread the call by publishing his manifestos in newspapers. He was a resourceful promoter whose tone was unapologetically explosive, peevish, insulting, and belligerently ecstatic. His position as the most conspicuous representative of Italian Futurism was adversarial, subversive, and intolerantly democratic. The events of the Twenties and Thirties, however, were such that what began as an earnest, and in many respects necessary, program for global, pan-cultural change became nearly indistinguishable from totalitarian ideology. The rigor of the Futurists' denunciations and their energetic, petulant enthusiasm for the new, gave much of their work a strange double valence, at once blissfully liberating and punishingly authoritarian.

The double valence is shockingly apparent in the first image one confronts at the top of the staircase. Boccioni's *Unique Form of Continuity in Space* (1913) is probably the best known Futurist icon. We recognize at once the formal principles that he explored so brilliantly in his Futurist years, from 1910 to his early death in 1916. The tall striding figure, with its monumental streaking-bronze effect in space, realizes Boccioni's desire to obtain what he called a "simultaneity" of duration and stasis, "a synthesis between what is remembered and what is seen." From his teacher Balla he had learned the new stress on dynamism, but against the more schematic representation of velocity in Balla's work Boccioni wanted time's quick stream seen and felt in the rhythm of its flowing. The statue is a stunning articulation of matter in motion. Installed in its niche, however, surrounded by tall black enamel panels, that human image with its abstract title is also the most powerful martial icon of the century. Up from the bronze platform, out of the thick bronze pedestals, toils a monstrously sinewy, invulnerable man-machine, a pure urgency of will untrammeled by meditative delay. Small wings, reminiscent of Balla's swallow forms, flare from the heels and calves like instruments of

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flight, but also like spurs, or scythes—the entire lower body looks like an unstoppable harvesting machine. The torso, all curvilinear flanks and planes, is expressive at once of the continuities of the human form moving through space and of that form armored in thick bronze folds that overlap like wings. In "Man Multiplied and the Reign of Machinery," Marinetti announced: "We believe in the possibility of an incalculable number of human transformations, and we declare without a smile that wings slumber within the flesh of man. When man is able to externalize his will so that it extends beyond him like an enormous arm, dream and desire, which today are vain words, will reign supreme in vanquished space and time." The Futurists believed that units of force composed the essence of objects, and that these could be externalized in "force lines," the tensed vectors and radiating blades and gills so evident in their images. The force lines in Boccioni's statue describe, and celebrate, the exercise of Marinetti's transformational will.

Boccioni, however, is too complex an artist to be treated as a mere exemplar or implementer of Futurist ideas. This much is obvious from the selection of his pre-Futurist work in another show, "Boccioni in Venice," at the Chiesa di San Stae. The early portraits are particularly interesting because they dramatize a tense truce between the flesh of the subject and the thing-world surrounding it. The cross-hatched inner structure they both share, especially evident in the pastels, is always faintly visible as the common ground of reality. The flesh has to resist the necessity of surrounding matter. In a portrait of his mother from 1906, in grays and half-whites, the subject's inertia is flustered by the flyaway strands of gray hair that pick up the oscillating rhythms of the background. Although the sitter is heavily *there,* dynamism is yet tightly coiled within her form. Even this early in his career, Boccioni is painting a study in movement, but the dynamism waits to be set free as an independent force from the figurative conventions of portraiture. In another *la madre,* from 1907, the action of the thing-world is more fused to the figure; both are heavily scored by that under-form, that hatchwork (which in Boccioni's early house-under-construction scenes becomes fully externalized in the scaffoldings). The background in the 1907 portrait is now more tightly knit—the colors are becalmed blacks, grays, and smokey whites—to the life of the flesh. Again, wisps of hair float behind the mother's head. In *The Sick Mother* of 1908 the subject reclines on snowy linen streaked with green highlights, as if the quickened vegetable world were ceding to the candor of mortality. Only the smudged gray and powdery orange tints of the mother's face preserve her from being taken over by the geological scorings of the background. These early canvases are important, I think, because even while working within the conventions of portraiture, with all its tremendous stillness, Boccioni is developing a vision of the action of matter which will lead him quite naturally toward the extreme kineticism of Futurism.

Boccioni held certain Futurist convictions as early as 1907, three years before he met Marinetti, when he wrote in a letter that Italians were living "*in un sogno storico*"—that is, in a reverie of history that induced torpor and useless nostalgia. With his turn away from meditative portraiture, away from the endless and enervating inflections of historical reflectiveness, came an apposite change in his work. Around 1910, the year of his first one-man show at Ca' Pesaro in Venice (introduced by Marinetti), Boccioni began to change the essential style of his drawing. He declared in 1910 that *The City Rises,* a large canvas completed that year, was "*un lavoro di trasizione e credo degli ultimi.*" It was indeed among the last, for in its surging tidal forms of men and beasts heaving a city into existence, the force holding the elements together is centripetal. When he became a Futurist, he said that "the figure has to become the center from which plastic directions depart into space." The new force is centrifugal: the stress lines of matter radiate from the figure, they do not converge upon it. In 1912, he painted two more portraits

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of his mother, though now she is called *Horizontal Construction* and *Materia*. The finely tissued webwork of the early portraits has been transformed into steely, sheeted, intersecting facets and angles. Boccioni's subject is no longer the flesh struggling in an object-world, but rather the action of an energy in the life of forms.

Much of what he and other Futurist painters had to say about their practice focused on draughtsmanship. In *The Salon of 1846* Baudelaire wrote that "pure draughtsmen [as opposed to colorists] are naturalists, endowed with one excellent sense; but their drawing is a rationalist enterprise, whereas that of the colorists is a matter of feeling, an almost unconscious process." Boccioni was, in Baudelaire's terms, a pure draughtsman. And the great strength of Futurist art, from the antic angular caricatures of Depero to the moody social documentary of Carlo Carrà, is largely in its draughtsmanship. A colorist depends too much on precisely the sort of irrational feeling and instinct for movement that artists with a program need to avoid, for fear of sabotaging the program. Moreover, the traditions of the great colorists—the *macchiaioli* were the most recent in Italy, though their influence on the Futurists goes entirely unremarked in the catalogue—run counter to the anti-sentimental purpose of the Futurists. At its most debased, coloring for the Futurists was merely a sort of sensational violence exercised upon inventive draughtsmanship.

The Futurist program went beyond art. It meant to change people's hearts and minds. "Anarchists are satisfied to assault the political, judicial, and economic branches of the social tree," Marinetti declared, "whereas we want much more . . . . We want to tear up and burn that tree's deepest roots." Those roots were nourished by "cowardly quietism, love of the old and ancient, of what's sick and corrupt, the horror of the new, contempt for youth, the veneration of time, of the accumulated years, of the dead and the dying." Marinetti singles out his targets, but each one represents a general condition; taken all together they are so manifold that the Futurist attack must be waged on a broad global front. Consequently, most of the manifesto literature produced by the movement has both a particularized aphoristic force (the force of tables of law) *and* the intimidating hysteria of wild machine-gun bursts. The exhibition catalogue, in keeping with the Futurist spirit, suffers from the same overparticularized but blurred purpose. Its encyclopedic format offers a blizzard of facts, while obscuring long clear views. Since it is crucial to the show's public success that Futurism be shown to be the most influential and relevant "ism" of the early century, all sorts of names are enlisted under its banner. Nietzsche, Sorel, Munch, Apollinaire, John Marin, Ungaretti, Charles Demuth, Dino Campana—all become, in the catalogue's retelling, near or distant figures in the Futurist story. What neither the show nor the catalogue offers is lucid historical analysis (and because of the hundreds of documents on display, the exhibition had a real opportunity to do so) or a coherent argument. The curators offer instead more of what the Futurists themselves provided in abundance—self-glorifying publicity.

The most prickly issue, and the one most thoroughly botched in the catalogue, is the relationship between Futurism and fascism. An essay by Antonello Trombadori in a recent special number of *Nuovi Argomenti* argues that when Marinetti and the members of the Futurist Political Party broke from fascism in 1920, after their initial participation in the *Fasci di combattimento,* it was not because they felt that fascism had turned too sharply to the Right, but because they themselves held to an "ultrafascism." Official fascism did not go far enough. The Futurist position was even more nationalistic, anti-monarchical, and anti-clerical than the fascist line. In Trombadori's analysis, the Futurists were, at that time, more single-mindedly intolerant of any divergence from their program to level the past and dissolve the fogs of "historical consciousness." Trombadori's argument is directed against those apologists who present the Futurists as left-

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ist dissenters and early opponents of the regime. In 1923, at any rate, Marinetti publicly realigned himself with fascism; in 1929 he was elected to the Academy of Italy, and as late as 1935 was a vocal advocate of a fascist future.

The catalogue entry on "Ideology" by Renzo De Felice refuses to draw any equation between Futurism and fascism. To accomplish this, he has to insist that Futurism had no ideology, only "artistic attitudes" and strategies: "On the whole Futurism had no ideology, nor did it want one. If to some extent it is possible to construct an ideology after the fact, this assumes contradictory, changing forms which vary according to the groups composing the movement, so it cannot be forced into the narrow limits of an abstract lowest common denominator." To explain Marinetti's announcements in the 1909 manifesto, "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt for women," De Felice concocts the proposition that "war" be taken metaphorically, "as fullness of life and even as rejoicing, essentially as an individual and artistic fact, which became collective for the Italians in 1911 and more particularly in 1915-18 because it took on the value of a 'revelation' of the 'true Italian powers,' that is, of the triumph of 'futurism' over '*passatismo.*'" Those quotation marks are little nooses choking off the oxygen that might clarify De Felice's ideas. The hygienic purpose of war, as he reconstructs it, is to restore life—festively—individually and socially. But not "real" war. Marinetti could not possibly have meant real war, since that is a tragic business, and Marinetti did not believe in tragedy. (He looted Nietzsche's vocabulary of will and power but dismissed Nietzsche as a retrograde classicist who believed in tragedy.) What De Felice refuses to acknowledge is the strain of giddy nihilism in Futurist thinking.

The torturous ambivalence of De Felice's explanation imitates what I think was Marinetti's own fiery confusion. He wanted two things at once: the artist as holy noisemaker, announcing and creating the future, answerable only to his responsibilities as a Futurist, not obliged by norms that apply to established social and political orders; but also the artist as inciter, as provocateur promulgating the new program to the masses, shaping their lives with his vision and his products (the Futurists made clothing and furniture, designed advertising campaigns for Campari, wrote a cookbook, etc.). The artist would therefore have actual power over the life of the crowd, but because of his holy noisemaker status he was also morally autonomous. The artist was thus a pure performer, intent on changing the lives of his audience but feeling no sense of consequence for that power. Many of Marinetti's pronouncements are performances in that sense: his ideas are italicized by their manner of presentation, and their exhilarating inconsistencies become grotesque but unignorable. In the first famous manifesto published in *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909, he announced: "Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on the unknown forces, to induce them to prostrate themselves before man." That beauty results from strife is, though Marinetti pretends not to know it, a Romantic article of faith. That poetry is above all an "attack," offensive and assaultive, rather than a receiving or contemplative activity, is a more stringent (and attention-getting) assertion. To believe that poetry is essentially imperialistic, conquistadorial, and that its purpose is to subdue and subjugate those coyly unidentified "unknown forces," is to model the purpose of poetry so closely on the forms of political power that it may more readily and "innocently" become an instrument of state power, of state "knowledge," of ideology. The tone here and in other Futurist documents (even in Valentine de Saint-Point's *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman,* written in 1912 to oppose what Germano Celant calls Marinetti's "masculine hysteria") is unremittingly aggressive and proclamatory. Even if

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we allow for Marinetti's occasionally sly, bad-boy humor, the martial tone dominates: "Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice." The anti-sentimental impulse in Futurism became obsessional avoidance, and its emotional range was narrowed accordingly. The sort of world the Futurists called for was an emotionally impoverished and over-legislated one. They were not, all things considered, masters of the finer tones, not even Boccioni. As ideology and practice, Futurism was in too violent a hurry to bother with nuance and discrimination.

The Futurists were driven by the need to pursue what Marinetti called "the implications of new facts," which had to be absorbed and transformed by artists. In their early paintings of workers and houses under construction, Boccioni and Balla were already coping with the implications of new facts. But later Futurist pronouncements, along with the stabbing, overexcited vitalism of their canvases, suggest an even deeper anxiety: that the artist was being made more and more marginal by the new facts and by the velocity with which those facts came and went (or reproduced themselves). The artist had not only to keep pace, he also had to define (or improvise) his own position along the way. The Futurist strategy was to adopt the manners of competing technologies—to be quick, aggressive, efficient, explicitly manipulative, unsentimental, and intrusive. Here, too, their methods were helplessly equivocal insofar as they were adversarial in contesting the new "marginalization" of the artist, but conciliatory and imitative in their accommodations.

The attention to new facts, along with the importance they attached to *dinamismo,* led Futurist artists to investigate the nature of their materials. "Instead of *humanizing* animals, vegetables, and minerals (an outmoded system) we will be able to animalize, vegetalize, mineralize, electrify or liquify our style, making it live the life of matter." Marinetti is speaking here about Futurist poetry, but his intent to "destroy the canals of syntax" and rid poetry of its sentimental and historical excrescences had its equivalents in the practice of Futurist painters. Gino Severini's *Armoured Train,* with its slashed multiple perspectives, discloses a file of infantry firing from what looks like a rolling steel-plated trench, a mounted artillery piece blasting away from the front end. Embedded in sulphurous scissors and triangles of green and yellow light, the train looks encased in its own velocity as it cuts a swath through the teeming air. New martial facts are the painting's subject, but more importantly for Severini the Futurist, the life of matter is being enacted in paint. In keeping with Futurist predilections, however, the scene is empty of sentimental content. The faceless infantrymen in blue capes, like so many cowled anonymous monks at prayer, are presented by the artist's imagination as *matter equivalent to* the knobby rivet-heads efficiently distributed around the train and cannonplates. The soldiers are thus nothing more than elements in a scheme of new formal facts. Like the vehicle they occupy, they have been made over into senseless instruments of a will not their own. The transformational activity Marinetti called for is indeed apparent here, as elsewhere in Futurist art, but the discriminating faculty has been sacrificed to the enthusiasm for likenesses.

Contrived, programmatic excitement leads to terminal weariness. The Futurists' relentless brassy optimism, combined with all that elated moonlight-killing, in an exhibition of this size leads almost inevitably to the sepulchral tedium and quaintness one feels in a wax museum. The "Futurisms" of Russia, Latin America, Japan, Germany, France, and other countries, which occupy the third floor galleries, hammer Futurist mannerisms into different shapes, with varying degrees of wit and anger (and, in the special case of Maiakovsky, with different political import). But the surprise comes near the end, in the room devoted to British Futurism, and especially in the work of Christopher Nevinson and Wyndham Lewis.

Two large canvases by Nevinson, *Returning to the Trenches* (1914-15) and *Troops*

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Resting (1916), exploit the formal resources of Futurism. (His ties with the Futurist movement, loose as they were, lasted until 1919). *Returning to the Trenches* is nearly overloaded with the dynamism of soldiers scrambling for safety, ranks tilted and hurtling back towards cover, legs flashing through the serial "moments" familiar in Futurist images. The panic, however, is palpable. The image is a design of mortal fear. It accommodates a world of new facts, but the quickness in the draughtsmanship and coloring enacts the quick of feeling. Unlike in Severini's *Armoured Train,* here we can distinguish human from mineral fact. In *Troops Resting,* the angular planes of Futurist drawing enact the exhaustion of troops slumped on a railway embankment. Each face has a singular character. Over all their heads runs the telegraph line, hovering like an instrument of execution. In *A Battery Shelled* (1914-18), Wyndham Lewis paints a world in which nearly everything is or will soon become war debris. The stiff forms of the artillerymen imitate the bristling groups of stacked shells which look like monstrous vegetables, whereas the soldiers' bodies (not those of the officers, who look on calmly from a distance) seem reptilian, armor-plated. Mineral ordnance assumes the look of vegetable abundance; the human is being transformed into mineral matter. The metallic folds of the human forms mock the shape of the landscape, the crudely terraced earthworks colored a sickened blue-green. Here, too, we have a chronicle of new transformations, but they are calibrated by a discriminating intelligence. Lewis's painting is febrile, angry, and accusatory; the passion is enacted in a recognizably Futurist vocabulary of forms. But Lewis plays off the cool angularity and centrifugal movement of Futurism against the brittle dread being lived out through those forms.

Marinetti and his group loathed what they called the professorial past. As one arrives at the British room, however, the polemical program of the Futurists and its expression in the painting have begun to smell of the lecture hall. For all their clamorous enthusiasm and announcements of passion, the art the Futurists made is eerily lacking in temperament—which seems somehow to have been edited out of their program—and this deficiency turns much of their work into academicism. The British room is, on the contrary, practically overripe with temperament; it is, in any case, stretching the issue to identify Nevinson, Lewis, Jacob Epstein, and Gaudier-Brzeska as Futurists. The four were also associated with Vorticism, which for a brief time had points of contact with Futurism. The Vorticists, too, prized energy, action, and force, and insisted on claiming the world of facts. But the new motion valued by the Vorticists did not exclude the velocities of the past; it welcomed, insisted on, all past "vectors" of knowledge as part of the vortex that revolved around the individual artist. A genuinely new work of art, for Gaudier-Brzeska and his friend and advocate Ezra Pound, was inevitably worked on, shaped, by the action of the vortex. Art was an emergence *from* and *out of.* The Futurists, on the other hand, had only the initiating ego. In his catalogue entry on "Philosophy" Massimo Carrà says that "The Futurist ego, or 'I,' is its own act; it acts itself and is nothing without this acting." It acted, moreover, according to a program. The result was to bleed its art of temperament and mood, and to turn it into a new set of idealizations. Any quest for the sort of purity sought by the Futurists has to suppress, eliminate, or reduce to academic exercise the expression of passion for the human. After 1910, in Boccioni's work there is no longer any contest between the flesh and its surroundings because the sense of the carnal is entirely gone.

The British artists were also trying to reckon with world war, and when necessary they tried to enlarge the confines of older narrative conventions in order to accommodate the new efficiencies for creating what Elias Canetti calls "the heaps of the dead." I've already suggested that Futurist optimism was a cultivated ignorance, but that is obvious enough and perhaps simplistic. Behind that optimism was, I think, a neu-

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rotic fear of reflectiveness and moral consequence. The loud, belligerent generosity that runs through the Futurists' art and writings is also self-righteous protectiveness. They cared abundantly about what artists never ought to care about. They cared about being right. Marinetti called for the expression of a new consciousness, but he and many of his fellows were too impatient, and too performance-obsessed, to do the deeper work—to brood on the nature of that consciousness.

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Becoming Elias Canetti

by Roger Kimball

Elias Canetti is regarded by many as one of the century's most distinguished writers. At least since he was awarded the Nobel Prize, in 1981, he has been regularly compared, if not to Proust or Joyce or Mann, then certainly to his Viennese brethren Robert Musil and Hermann Broch. Yet one suspects that, in America at least, Canetti's works have been rather more respected than read. This is particularly true in the case of the two long and difficult books upon which his reputation mainly rests: *Auto-da-Fé* (1935), his first and only novel, and *Crowds and Power* (1960), the meticulously idiosyncratic contribution to social theory that he considers his major work.[1]

In fact, Canetti is one of that handful of writers whose reputations have been successfully nourished largely offstage. His relatively few works have aspired to be exemplary productions: scrupulously avant-garde yet "large" enough in their ambition to command mainstream critical attention. But the long periods between works seem equally exemplary. Canetti's silences are *conspicuous* silences. In this age of volubility, when many writers seem to be as intent on keeping their name in front of the public as they are on cultivating their art, simply being circumspect about publishing one's work precipitously carries with it a presumption of integrity. And Canetti has been nothing if not circumspect. *Crowds and Power,* for example, was the result of over twenty years of research and meditation, followed by another eleven years devoted to writing. "I realized," Canetti wrote in one recollection, "that one can devote a whole lifetime to one or two works, and patience, which I had always admired, acquired something monumental for me." Such reticence has endowed his career with an aura of self-possession and authenticity. Though his fame as a writer has grown slowly—"accreted," one is tempted to say—it has matured without compromise or adulteration. The pearl-like result is remarkable as much for its carefully nurtured shape as for its beguiling sheen.

With the publication of the first two volumes of Canetti's memoirs, *The Tongue Set Free: Remembrance of a European Childhood* (1977) and *The Torch in My Ear* (1980), something of this painstaking development was set before us. These volumes took us from Canetti's itinerant childhood through his intellectual maturity in Vienna. They provided a moving portrait of the writer's family and youth—especially of his intensely intimate, though increasingly

1 Dates are of first publication in German. *Auto-da-Fé—Die Blendung,* "The Blinding," in German—was translated by C. V. Wedgwood and first appeared here in 1947 under the title *The Tower of Babel.* It was reissued, to greater notice, under its present title in 1963, when *Crowds and Power* first appeared in English in a translation by Carol Stewart. Both volumes are currently published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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strained, relationship with his mother—and set forth the formative enthusiasms of his intellectual apprenticeship in the Twenties.

The recent appearance of the third volume of memoirs, *The Play of the Eyes,* completes the chronicle of Canetti's early years.[2] Bringing us through the death of his mother in 1937, the trilogy includes a detailed account of the years in which he wrote *Auto-da-Fé* (1930-31) and two of his three major plays,[3] and formulated the basic argument of *Crowds and Power.* In addition, the second and third volumes, especially, contain sharply realized sketches of the many leading cultural figures that populated Canetti's life in the Twenties and Thirties. Freud fails to make an on-stage appearance—we learn that Canetti's antipathy to Freud's theories is deep—but Karl Kraus, Alban Berg, Hermann Broch, Berthold Brecht, George Grosz, Oskar Kokoschka, Robert Musil, and others of similar stature emerge with a sometimes ruthless clarity in these pages. Besides supplying us with revealing tableaux of Canetti's distinguished friends and acquaintances, these memoirs tell us a good deal about his own developing preoccupations—his rebellion against the fact of death, his fascination with the phenomenon of the crowd, his elevation of aesthetic fastidiousness to an almost moral passion. Indeed, taken together, Canetti's memoirs may be said to offer us an unsurpassed introduction to the motivating themes, influences, and *dramatis personae* that made up the substance of his work and world. As such, they provide an apt occasion to review the signal ambitions and achievements of this difficult writer.

Since 1938, when he fled Austria to escape Hitler, Canetti has divided his time mostly between London and Zurich. But his beginnings were hardly so cosmopolitan. He was born in Ruschuk, Bulgaria, in 1905, to well-established Sephardic parents with deep familial and business ties in the area. The first of three sons, he seems to have been quite doted upon. Nevertheless, his childhood was not what one would describe as blissful. "When I think back on my early years," he tells us in *The Tongue Set Free,* "the very first things I recognize are the fears, of which there was an inexhaustible wealth." The word "terror" and its variants occur with notable frequency in this first volume of memoirs, whose title would seem to recall not only Canetti's growing command of language but perhaps also, in a macabre way, his inauguration to fear. The book opens with his earliest memory, of a smiling man who approaches him in a friendly manner when he is out walking with the maid:

> He steps right up close to me, halts, and says: "Show me your tongue." I stick out my tongue, he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a jackknife, opens it, and brings the blade all the way to my tongue. He says: "Now we'll cut off his tongue." I don't dare pull back my tongue, he comes closer and closer, the blade will touch me any second. In the last moment, he pulls back the knife, saying, "Not today, tomorrow." He snaps the knife shut again and puts it back in his pocket.
>
> Every morning, we step out of the door . . . and the smiling man appears . . . . That's how the day starts, and it happens very often.

The smiling man turned out to be the maid's lover, his jackknife the means to secure the young Canetti's silence.

2 Canetti's memoirs are published here by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. *The Tongue Set Free* appeared in English in 1979, *The Torch in My Ear* in 1982. Both were translated—not terribly well, I'm afraid—by Joachim Neugroschel. *The Play of the Eyes* (328 pages, $22.50) was published in June in a superior translation by Ralph Manheim.

3 *The Wedding* (1932) and *Comedy of Vanity* (1933-34). Canetti's other major play, *Life Terms,* was written in 1952. All three are acerbic social satires, distinguished mostly for their polemic and attempts to plumb character and personality by exploring what Canetti dubbed a person's "acoustic mask," his distinctive use and habits of language. For a useful overview of Canetti's plays, see the essay by Klaus Völker that introduces *Comedy of Vanity and Life Terms,* translated by Gitta Honegger (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1983).

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The rich, polyglot, still largely peasant culture of Ruschuk no doubt did much to stock Canetti's imagination. His work, especially his purely literary work, has a crowded earthiness that one may plausibly trace to the influence of those early years. But the town came to be a prison for his parents. They had courted and married in Vienna, and their hearts had remained there; they reserved German as their language of intimacy, speaking only Ladino, a Sephardic Spanish dialect, to the children and the rest of the family. Both parents had had artistic aspirations, his mother in the world of the theater, his father primarily in music. The pressures of marriage, their own domineering parents, and a growing family business conspired to blight those aspirations, tearing the couple away from their beloved Vienna and forcing the provincialities of Ruschuk upon them. Canetti's father, Jacques, seems to have found life there particularly oppressive. He seized the chance to move his family to Manchester, England, when a suitable business opportunity opened up in 1911. Jacques's own father, the family patriarch, strongly, intractably, opposed the move; a few days before his son was to depart for England with his family, he solemnly cursed him in public and swore he would have nothing more to do with him.

Canetti spent about two years in Manchester. He began attending school, learned English, and grew quite close to his father, who gave him children's versions of Dante, Grimm's fairy tales, *The Arabian Nights, Gulliver's Travels, Tales from Shakespeare,* and other works, patiently reviewing his son's reading with him every evening. The grandfather Canetti's curse proved cruelly potent, however: in the fall of 1912, when he was but thirty years old, Jacques Canetti died suddenly, apparently of a stroke. In what he describes as "the final version" of his father's death, Canetti tells us that his mother much later confessed that his father had been in a jealous rage when he died. She had just returned, at his father's insistence, from taking the cure at Bad Reichenhall, where she had twice prolonged her stay. Her doctor there had fallen in love with her—largely, it seems, over their spirited discussions of the plays of August Strindberg, who was his mother's favorite playwright. In the end, nothing happened between them. But when she returned and told Jacques of the doctor's attentions, he became furious, refused to believe her innocent, and threatened not to speak a word to her until she confessed everything. His resolve lasted until the next day, when after a sleepless night he collapsed and died.

A few months after his father's death, Canetti moved with his mother and two brothers first to Zurich and then to Vienna. On the way to Vienna, his mother decided that the time had come to initiate him into the German language. Her method was nothing if not simple. She would recite German sentences to him and make him repeat them until she was satisfied with his pronunciation; then she would translate them for him once only and expect him to remember them. Patience was never her special virtue, however, and when he failed to remember his lesson correctly, she grew exasperated and rewarded him by shouting such encouraging remarks as, "My son's an idiot! I didn't realize that my son's an idiot!" or "Your father knew German too, what would your father say!"

The romantic, high-strung, imperiously demanding temperament of Canetti's mother played a dominating role in his life. Nevertheless—or perhaps for this very reason—Canetti became extremely close to his mother in succeeding years, in many respects taking his father's place as the emotional center of her world. He supported her in her grief, her guilt, assuming emotional and intellectual responsibilities beyond his years. At the age of ten, he would spend evenings reading and discussing Shakespeare, Schiller, and the wonders of the theater with her. Not surprisingly, he did not look with favor upon his mother's suitors, of whom there were not a few. In 1915, he recalls, when she seemed to be encouraging the attentions of one hopeful candidate, "the jealousy that tortured me all my life commenced, and the

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force with which it came over me marked me forever. It became my true passion . . . ." About the same time, when he overheard his mother talking with his grandmother and aunt about the possibility of remarrying, he burst into the room and declared, "'If you get married, I'll jump off the balcony.' It was a terrible threat, it was meant in earnest; I know with absolute certainty that I would have done it."

The threat worked. Canetti's mother never did remarry, preferring to devote—or, as she liked to put it, to "sacrifice"—herself to her son. Such sacrifices are not purchased lightly, of course, and she never let him forget it. In later years, whenever Canetti would become seriously involved with a woman, his mother would revile her and upbraid him for ingratitude. He learned to practice an elaborate dissimulation about his private life, inventing numerous casual liaisons to distract her. When he finally got married, in 1935, to a woman named Veza (I do not believe Canetti ever tells us her maiden name), he attempted to keep news of his marriage from his mother. She soon discovered it, however, and before long wrote to him saying that she never wanted to see him again.

Canetti's mother is the emotional lodestar of *The Tongue Set Free* and much of *The Torch in My Ear*. As he grows more independent, other, equally formidable, personalities and his own work—above all his own work—crowd in upon his life, tearing him further and further from his mother's orbit. She is not a major presence in most of *The Play of the Eyes*. But it is only fitting that this extraordinary woman should return to center stage at the end of the volume, exerting for one last time her claim on Canetti's allegiance and bringing this cycle of memoirs to a close. In June, 1937, two years after his mother had broken with him, Canetti received word from his youngest brother that she was mortally ill. He went to Paris to see her, and presented her with a bouquet of roses that he said were from Ruschuk. The imperious old lady lay there and took in the fragrance of the roses, the fragrance of her childhood, seeming to accept them and pardon their giver. Even now, though, she did nothing to make things easy. At first she asked her son to move his chair farther and farther from her bed, until finally he was sitting in the corner on the other side of the room. Time and again she told him to leave the room and wait outside.

> Her breathing grew weaker, but the power of her eyes grew stronger . . . . She looked at me until she hated me. Then she said: "Go!" Every day she said that several times, and each time it was to punish me . . . . Then I would wait in the next room until the nurse came in and nodded to let me know my mother had asked for me. When I went in to her, her gaze would seize hold of me with such force that I feared it would exhaust her, her eyes grew wider and brighter, she said nothing. Then suddenly would gasp: "Go!"

A few days later, she was dead. The play of the eyes had ended.

In many respects, Canetti's youth was extraordinarily sheltered. "It was true that I didn't want to learn what the world was like," he noted about his life in the mid-Twenties. "I had the feeling that by gaining insight into something objectionable, I would make myself its accomplice." Canetti's own works, which deal with a great many objectionable things, suggest that he later came to appreciate the value of such insight, though it may be that elements of his earlier reticence lived on in his insistence on absolute artistic purity and distaste for anything having to do with business. But throughout his adolescence, he strove to preserve for himself a spiritually rarefied atmosphere untroubled by anything worldly. When he went to school in Zurich in his early adolescence, for example, he lived at a girls' boarding school, and was the only male at the school. But his mother had managed to impose a taboo on sexual intimacy so successfully that then and for years afterwards, he claims, "I never asked about sex, it was never on my mind . . . ."

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At this time, at least, his pleasures would seem to have been exclusively cerebral. He read voraciously, was precocious in his literary tastes, and soon began to develop literary interests of his own. At fourteen, he wrote a play based on the career of Junius Brutus, the Roman consul who had had his sons executed for taking part in a conspiracy against the Republic. He sent the play to his mother with great expectations, but her lack of reaction led him to make a more sober estimate of its aesthetic merits: "There may have been young writers revealing talent at the age of fourteen. I was definitely not one of them."

It was around this time, too, that Canetti began to develop a serious—or at least a sustained—interest in science and natural history. "'Scientific' became a magic word for me at that time," he recalled, though, at least initially, his mother was none too encouraging about his scientific endeavors. She always insisted that education have a direct relevance to "life" (the word as she used it must appear in quotation marks), and for her a purely intellectual concern with "the phylogeny of spinach"—as she was wont to disparage his scientific studies—was simply a waste of time. Not that she encouraged him to pursue his studies for any merely practical end; in accordance with her romantic-theatrical—not to say histrionic—conception of "life," the main thing was to express oneself forcefully on the stage of cultured society. While Canetti never had any real intention of pursuing a scientific career, he nevertheless persevered with his studies, eventually taking a Ph.D. in chemistry at the University of Vienna in 1929.

Canetti describes his two years at the boarding school in Zurich, from 1919 to 1921, as "a time *without fear*" and "the only perfectly happy years" of his life. Yet his mother had other ideas about his time there. She had become increasingly worried about the self-absorbed path her son's life was taking at the cloistered environment of the boarding school. Visiting him in 1920, she delivered herself of a devastating harangue, accusing him of living a life of decadence and effeminacy, a life oblivious to the pulse of real life. Real life is not a matter of books, she insisted; while he might be perfectly content to sit there and study, eventually—he was fifteen at the time—"One has to stop learning and do something. That's why you have to get away from here." "You've done *nothing,*" Canetti reports her as saying.

> "Do you really think you're a human being? A human being is someone who has struggled through life. Have you ever been in any danger? Has anyone ever threatened you? No one's ever smashed your nose . . . . You're not a human being yet. You're nothing. A chatterbox is no human being."

Her prescription for transforming him into a human being was a healthy dose of German discipline, and thus Canetti soon found himself removed to Frankfurt, where he lived for the next few years with his mother and brothers. Now once again, he writes, his life was "filled with terror." But while he claims that he never got over leaving Zurich, he concludes that he, "like the earliest man, came into being only by an expulsion from Paradise."

Canetti's first, and in many respects his most important, guide outside the Eden of Zurich was the Viennese satirist and radical pacifist Karl Kraus. Kraus was an enormously influential figure in Viennese intellectual circles—rivaled, according to Canetti, only by Freud. Since 1899, when he started the fortnightly polemical journal *Die Fackel,* "The Torch," Kraus had devoted himself body and soul to exposing the hypocrisy and aesthetic decadence of *fin de siècle* Viennese life. Kraus's criticism was verbally brilliant, often savage, and his standards of honesty ruthless—so ruthless, it seems, that in time he concluded that only he could fulfill them: after 1911 he became the magazine's sole contributor.

By all accounts, Kraus was also an extraordinarily effective orator, devastatingly sensitive to the linguistic foibles and subterfuges of his targets. As it happened, when Canetti first heard him lecture, in 1924, he

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was not much impressed. But in time Kraus became his paragon. Canetti estimates that all told he attended some one hundred of Kraus's lectures. The influence of Kraus's example on Canetti shows itself nowhere more clearly than in his unremittingly serious approach to language; "how sick I was of seeing words thus debased," Canetti writes in one typical passage, "for I took them so seriously that I even disliked distorting them for playful purposes, I wanted them *intact,* and I wanted them to carry their full force." Language was the torch in Canetti's ear, and there can be little doubt that it was lit in large part by his encounter with Karl Kraus and *Die Fackel.* Kraus's passionate satire was instrumental in awakening Canetti to the world, in giving his work the sense of direction and critical edge—what Canetti himself would later identify as a sense of "responsibility"—that life outside Paradise required.

Canetti's introduction to the world continued in Vienna—he met Veza around this time—and was as it were perfected by his visit to Berlin in the summer of 1928 at the invitation of the publisher Wieland Herzfelde. For one of Canetti's fastidious, even, as he describes it, "puritanical" constitution, Berlin in the Twenties was both a shock and a revelation. Its sleazy nightlife, frenetic pace, and ambience of despair contrasted markedly with Vienna, whose decadence was still wrapped in the garb of middle-class respectability. Above all, Berlin was awash with famous people. "So here I was in Berlin," Canetti writes, "never taking more than ten steps without running into a celebrity." Herzfelde seemed to know everyone, and Canetti was soon introduced to the leading literary and artistic personalities of Weimar Berlin, most notably to Berthold Brecht and George Grosz. He was also finally introduced personally to Karl Kraus, who was a friend of Brecht's and was visiting Berlin at the time. Canetti was astonished and delighted when he went with Herzfelde to meet Grosz at his studio and the artist gave him a copy of his *Ecce Homo* prints, which had been banned as obscene. Grosz's biting *exposés* of corrupt Berlin society were just the thing to appeal to Canetti's sensibility. "His drawings had struck me to the core at first sight," Canetti recalls. "Since they were extreme, I regarded them as Truth."

In Canetti's view, it was only on returning to Vienna in the fall of 1929 after his second trip to Berlin that his "necessary life" really began. His official studies were at an end; he had received his Ph.D. in chemistry in June. What continued and accelerated were the unofficial studies that would occupy him for the rest of his life. He worked translating Upton Sinclair into German to make a living, but devoted his best energies to his own writing projects. In a room somberly decorated with a print of Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece and looking out on the Steinhof insane asylum, he was seized with the inspiration for what would become *Auto-da-Fé.* He originally envisioned an eight-part epic to be titled the *Human Comedy of Madmen.* He spent the year 1929-30 in an ecstasy of writing. It was, he recalled, "the richest, most unbridled year of my life." He worked in a fever, sketching his various madmen, among them a religious fanatic, a technological visionary, a spendthrift, a man obsessed with truth, and a *Büchermensch,* a "Book Man" who lives only for and among his books. In the end, it was the Book Man who emerged from the crowd of characters to capture Canetti's imagination. He postponed his epic ambitions, devoting the following year, 1930-31, to writing a novel about him.

Essentially, *Auto-da-Fé* is a cautionary tale, depicting in graphic detail how reality can be capsized by obsession. It tells the story of Professor Peter Kien, "man of learning and specialist in sinology," whose ruling passion is his personal library of more than twenty-five thousand volumes. *Auto-da-Fé* is a long and involved novel, complicated by several subplots. But the main action recounts Kien's violent though celibate marriage to his uneducated housekeeper, Therese, who with her starched blue skirts and her own obsessive personality is perhaps Canetti's

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most successfully realized character. Kien grows increasingly out of touch with reality as the novel unfolds, until in the third and last section, "The World in the Head," he is a full-fledged paranoiac. This is the "blinding" to which the book's German title primarily refers. The tale ends with Kien's self-immolation in his beloved library. "When the flames reached him at last," the narrator concludes, "he laughed out loud, louder than he had ever laughed in all his life."

Canetti knew from the start that the novel would end with the Book Man's self-immolation; the symbolic significance of fire, soon to be developed at length in *Crowds and Power,* was already one of his main preoccupations. He had accordingly named his protagonist "Brand," that is, "conflagration," in his first sketches. As work on the novel progressed, "Brand" was rechristened "Kant" and the book was provocatively entitled *Kant Catches Fire.* It was Hermann Broch who insisted that the name "Kant" be changed. Canetti settled finally on "Kien"—"resinous pinewood"—thus preserving a hint of the combustibility he had tokened with "Brand."[4]

In tone, outlook, and texture, *Auto-da-Fé* may be described as a cross between Kafka (Canetti mentions that he first read *The Metamorphosis* around this time) and the Borges of stories like "The Library of Babel." It possesses, at any rate, something of the nightmarish quality of Kafka's tales as well as the cosmically displaced intellectuality that Borges specialized in. In a 1973 essay on the composition of *Auto-da-Fé,* Canetti recalls that "One day, the thought came to me that the world should not be depicted as in earlier novels, from one writer's standpoint as it were; the world had *crumbled,* and only if one had the courage to show it in its crumbled state could one possibly offer an authentic conception of it."[5] Surely, *Auto-da-Fé* succeeds in depicting the world in a "crumbled state." And in this respect it is undoubtedly an imaginative triumph of sorts; in sheer *relentlessness,* at least, it can have few rivals.

But I doubt whether even Canetti's most ardent admirers could wish that he had gone on to complete his epic. The idea that there might have been eight volumes like *Auto-da-Fé* is a prospect unpleasant to contemplate. For notwithstanding its obvious force and integrity, *Auto-da-Fé* is a brutal book. I suspect that most readers will agree with Hermann Broch when he accuses Canetti of being deliberately, even gratuitously, "terrifying" and complains of the "grotesqueness" of his characters. "You believe in alarming people to the point of panic," Canetti quotes Broch as saying. "[Y]ou end cruelly, mercilessly, with destruction . . . . Does it mean that you yourself have not found a way out or that you doubt the existence of a way out?"

Canetti answers no, but his response to completing the book suggests a more ambiguous reply. He begins *The Play of the Eyes* by claiming that he, too, had been devastated by the fire that consumed his character Professor Kien and his twenty-five thousand books. "What happens in that kind of book is not just a game, it is reality," he tells us solemnly. Like many of Canetti's more portentous comments about his own work, it is probably best not to consider this statement too closely. It seems designed mostly to underscore the existential pathos with which he would have us invest the work. At any rate, Canetti never really returned to the *Human Comedy of Madmen.* In his search for a "way out" of the chaos of modern life he embarked upon different paths: his satirical plays and, especially, his monumental study of mass behavior, *Crowds and Power.*

For many readers, the chief interest of *The*

4 The suggestion of fire is of course also preserved by the ecclesiastical title given to the book in English—*Auto-da-Fé,* Portuguese for "act of the faith," that is, the public announcement or execution of sentences imposed by the Inquisition, especially the burning of heretics at the stake.

5 "The First Book: *Auto-da-Fé,*" in Canetti's collection of essays, *The Conscience of Words,* translated by Joachim Neugroschel (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).

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Play of the Eyes will be in the many sketches it provides of Canetti's literary and artistic colleagues. There are portraits of Hermann Broch, the egotistical, womanizing conductor Hermann Scherchen ("He seemed to *conduct* [women] into loving him," Canetti observes, "and dropped them before they had even settled into their new position"), the composer Alban Berg, the sculptor Fritz Wotruba, and others. Perhaps because it is such a common feature of real life, pettiness among the great is a leitmotif of these pages. Thus we encounter James Joyce at a reading Canetti gave of his play *The Comedy of Vanity* in 1935. The play pictures a society that has been paralyzed by mass-hysteria after all mirrors and photographs are prohibited; vanity, and perhaps personality itself, demands its reflection in images. At the intermission, Joyce approached Canetti and said sourly, "I shave with a straight razor and no mirror," and left without uttering another word.

Nor does Robert Musil emerge in particularly flattering colors. Musil was clearly one of Canetti's literary heroes; of his great, unfinished novel, *The Man Without Qualities* (the first volume of which was published in 1930), Canetti remarks that it is "endless in two senses, immortal as well as unfinished." In his estimation, "among those who passed as writers in Vienna, or perhaps the whole German-speaking world, there was none of his rank." Musil himself, however, was not so generous. He casually disparaged the work of Broch—whom he hardly considered a writer at all—Joyce, and others. And though he went out of his way to congratulate Canetti on his success with *Auto-da-Fé,* he quickly retreated when Canetti responded by mentioning that he'd just received a long letter from Thomas Mann praising his book. "Did you?" Musil replied, and withdrew coldly. "With that," Canetti observes, "I was dismissed. Dismissed forever." (Apparently Musil did not like having his praise adulterated by company, even by the likes of Thomas Mann.) He was, writes Canetti, "touchier in his self-esteem than anyone else I have known."

Canetti's most disturbing portrait is undoubtedly of the composer's widow, Alma Mahler, who was then married to the writer Franz Werfel. Canetti was for a short time romantically involved with her daughter, Anna, a sculptress, who introduced him to the predatory old woman. She received him in her garden, surrounded by her "trophies," to which she directed his attention one by one. There was, for example, the vitrine in which Mahler's Tenth Symphony, left unfinished at the time of his death, lay open to the pages where he had forlornly indited "Almshi, beloved Almshi" to her; then there was the portrait of her as Lucrezia Borgia, painted by her unhappy lover, Oskar Kokoschka. Finally, there was her living trophy, another daughter, a stunning young girl of about sixteen. "Beautiful, isn't she?" Alma Mahler asked, when the girl presented herself before them.

> "This is my daughter Manon. By Gropius. In a class by herself . . . . Like father, like daughter. Did you ever see Gropius? A big handsome man. The true Aryan type. The only man who was racially suited to me. All the others who fell in love with me were little Jews. Like Mahler. The fact is, I go for both kinds."

It is only fair that Alma Mahler, so proud of her conquests, should herself have been transformed into a trophy of sorts. According to Canetti, Kokoschka, when he was teaching at Dresden, had had a life-size doll fabricated to look like Alma Mahler; he carried the doll with him everywhere—even to cafés, where it was served coffee. Rumor had it that he put it to bed with him at night.

At the center of *The Play of the Eyes* is Canetti's description of the enigmatic Dr. Sonne. Canetti had noticed him for months in a café they both frequented. He sat quietly in the corner, reading his newspapers. What initially drew Canetti's attention to him was his uncanny resemblance to Karl Kraus; though the very idea seems contradictory, he was like nothing so much as a *silent* Karl Kraus. As it happened, Dr. Sonne was a well-known figure in Viennese intellectual circles.

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It was Broch who finally introduced Canetti to him. And it would seem that Dr. Sonne's resemblance to Kraus was more than fortuitous, for in time he usurped Kraus's place as Canetti's mentor and idol. In what may be regarded as Canetti's highest register of praise, he tells us that "Dr. Sonne *spoke* as Musil *wrote*."

It is revealing that what Canetti should particularly admire about Dr. Sonne was his "ice-cold clarity" and "utterly impersonal" approach to ideas and, indeed, to life itself. "I have never listened to anyone so intently," Canetti writes. "I forgot that the speaker was a human being." For Canetti, Dr. Sonne seemed to embody the ideal of impersonal intellectual purity that he himself aspired to. Dr. Sonne was never seen reading a book, yet he nonetheless displayed a detailed knowledge of the most esoteric matters. He seemed to have no ambitions beyond truth itself: no axes to grind, no personal agenda to fulfill; his moral authority and self-possession were complete. It came as something of a disappointment, then—even, perhaps, a disillusionment—when Canetti discovered that Dr. Sonne had once actually *done* something. For it turned out that in his 'teens Dr. Sonne had published important poems in Hebrew under the name Abraham ben Yitzhak, poems that have been credited with inaugurating modernist poetry in the language and have earned him a respected place in the canon of that literature. But after all, this was a discreet undertaking, and one, moreover, that Dr. Sonne had soon abandoned, so Canetti was willing to forgive him the momentary lapse into action.

Echoing throughout Canetti's memoirs is the theme that he himself identifies as his central preoccupation: the rebellion against death. In fact, it is a theme that Canetti *invokes* rather more than deals with concretely. The truth is, it would require considerable hermeneutical ingenuity to discover it as a theme of any consequence in his literary work. Yet "the rebellion against death" can do much to infuse one's statements with an air of noble gravity, and so Canetti is only too happy to adopt it as a kind of motto for his work: "I have spent the best part of my life figuring out the wiles of man as he appears in historical civilizations," Canetti observes at the beginning of *The Tongue Set Free*. "There is almost nothing bad that I couldn't say about humans and humankind. And yet my pride in them is so great that there is only one thing I really hate: their enemy, death." Canetti's response to the fact of death—"the only fact," as he sometimes puts it—is a tragic stance of rebellion against an ineluctable fate. The overriding question for every individual, he writes in *The Torch in My Ear,* is "whether he should put up with the fact that a death is imminent for him."

Canetti has never worked out his thoughts on death in any systematic fashion. His basic message would seem to be the unexceptionable admonition not to go gentle into that good night. Yet he also uses the rejection of death as the starting point for other, often more questionable, sorts of statements. At one point, for example, his insistence that the individual take a stand against death leads him to the pious declaration that "I care about the life of *every* human being and not just that of my neighbor." And in one of his essays, he goes beyond the posture of stoically resisting death to tell us that "So long as death exists, no beauty is beautiful, no goodness is good." We must of course be grateful that Canetti cares about the lives of all of us, even if the word "cares" is rendered practically empty in this context. But as for the relation between death and beauty and death and goodness—well, here I think we must question Canetti's dictum. For it seems at least equally plausible that beauty and goodness can emerge as compelling forces in our lives only against the background of mortality; in this sense, death, as Wallace Stevens put it, is the mother of beauty. Things matter to us precisely because neither we nor they last forever. Now, I do not doubt that Canetti's meditations on death betray a core of genuine pathos. But in the end I'm afraid that they amount to little more than a collection of sentimental exhortations; their chief function would seem to

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be to perpetuate the atmosphere of intellectual melodrama within which Canetti prefers to operate. Indeed, they would hardly be worth scrutiny, except that Canetti insists on placing them at the very center of his thought.

If the rebellion against death is Canetti's underlying "philosophical" preoccupation, the phenomenon of the crowd has proven to be the theme that has most absorbed his attention over the years. In the winter of 1924-25, he had the "illumination" about the nature of crowds that, he writes, was to determine the rest of his life. Here again, we must make allowances for Canetti's rhetoric: the version of his intellectual development disseminated in these memoirs is too neat, too novelistic, too full of determining "illuminations" and single-minded passions to be credited without reservation. But there is no doubt that in the phenomenon of the crowd Canetti believed he had found a key to perennial mysteries. As he put it in *The Torch in My Ear,* "I realized that there is such a thing as a crowd instinct which is always in conflict with the personality instinct, and that the struggle between the two of them can explain the course of human history."

Canetti's first conscious experience of a crowd was in 1922, when he witnessed a mass demonstration protesting the assassination of Walter Rathenau, the German-Jewish industrialist and statesman. In the crowd, he discovered "a total alteration of consciousness" that is both "drastic and enigmatic." As he describes it, in fact, this first encounter with a crowd was little short of the kind of experience one finds recounted in certain species of mystical literature. It was

> an intoxication; you were lost, you forgot yourself, you felt tremendously remote and yet fulfilled; whatever you felt, you didn't feel it for yourself; it was the most selfless thing you knew; and since selfishness was shown, talked, and *threatened* on all sides, you needed this experience of thunderous unselfishness like the blast of the trumpet at the Last Judgment . . . . How could all this happen together? What was it?

After such an experience—which Canetti came to call "the discharge" in *Crowds and Power*—it is not surprising that the phenomenon of the crowd should become "the enigma of enigmas" for him. "In the crowd," he wrote, "the individual feels that he is transcending the limits of his own person." The problem is, however, that this intimation of transcendence "is based on an illusion": after the crowd disperses, as it must, the individual is catapulted back to himself, as alone and isolated as ever.

What crystallized Canetti's preliminary reflections on the phenomenon of the crowd was a second, and far more dramatic, experience on July 15, 1927, the day that Canetti describes as the "most critical day of my life after my father's death." In response to a headline in a government newspaper proudly announcing the acquittal of the men being held for the recent murder of several workers in Burgenland, an angry mob spontaneously formed from all over Vienna. And just as spontaneously, it marched to the Palace of Justice and set it afire. Canetti himself was swept along with the crowd. The entire experience engraved itself deeply into his imagination. A man standing on the sidelines lamenting loudly "The files are burning! The files are burning!" when the Palace of Justice was burning down and the police were firing into the crowd became a prototype for the character of the pyromaniacal Book Man, Professor Kien. And the spectacle of the crowd exploding into violence provided him with some of the central insights of *Crowds and Power*—the crowd's spontaneous formation, its lack of a recognizable leader, its culmination in destruction by fire: all these are aspects of the crowd that Canetti dwells upon at length in his book.

A text of nearly five hundred, closely printed pages, *Crowds and Power* is a study *sui generis.* It is part ethnological study, part contribution to mass psychology, and part

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exercise in comparative religion. But above all it is an exposition of one man's personal philosophy, his vision of the world. Only as such can we understand how the struggle between the so-called "crowd instinct" and the "personality instinct" can be proposed to "explain the course of human history." The book belongs to that voluminous literature in which intellectuals have attempted to come to terms with the intractably unintellectual phenomenon of mass society. From Max Weber to Hannah Arendt, intellectuals in this century have been fascinated by the spectacle of mass society—its expression in modern democracies and its perversion in totalitarianism; Hermann Broch, to take someone from Canetti's orbit, devoted most of his energies from the mid-Thirties until his death in 1951 to a study of mass psychology. Canetti's contribution attempts to provide us not with a scholarly reflection on mass society but with what we might call a poetics of the crowd, and this, perhaps, is one reason he did not bother to supply *Crowds and Power* with an index.

Nevertheless, the book is the product of remarkable—if somewhat idiosyncratic—erudition. It is divided into twelve sections with scores of short chapters dealing with everything from "The Domestication of Crowds in World Religions" to "The Rain Dances of the Pueblo Indians," from reflections on "The Psychology of Eating" to "Human Postures and Their Relation to Power." Like many such works, it abounds in categories—there are open crowds and closed crowds, "flight" crowds and "slow" crowds, even, Canetti tells us, crowds that are invisible. One must also mention that the book is written with a masterful and beguiling clarity; nor is there any doubt that it contains many revealing, even brilliant, observations on the psychology of crowds, the nature of power, and the way they have interacted across cultures and millennia; indeed, simply as a testimony against the infatuation with power—an infatuation that our century has suffered from greatly—*Crowds and Power* must be counted among the most eloquent and compelling of documents.

Yet for all this, the book is deeply flawed. It proceeds not by argument but by assertion. Thus, it opens with the statement: "There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown." An arresting proposition. But is it true? Unfortunately, this is a question seldom broached in these pages. In *The Torch in My Ear,* Canetti remarks that he scrupulously avoided "abstract philosophy" in his reading and meditations on the phenomenon of the crowd, hoping thereby to avoid the distance from lived experience that philosophy typically demands. But by avoiding the strictures that philosophical analysis presupposes, Canetti has not made his book more compelling, only less rigorous. Because it lacks any consistent argument, *Crowds and Power* threatens to disintegrate into a collection of observations, of *aperçus,* some telling, some banal, some simply false.[6]

On the other hand, if *Crowds and Power* is weakened by a paucity of argument, it is rendered practically surreal by Canetti's elevation of his main idea into a universal explanatory principle. He often writes as if all human behavior, and even abstract moral principles, are best interpreted as species of "crowd behavior." Of a man listening to a sermon, for example, Canetti writes that "he would have felt astonished or even indignant had it been explained to him that the large number of listeners present gave him more satisfaction than the sermon itself"—but, *pace* Canetti, who could blame him? Similarly, we learn that the real significance of the Sermon on the Mount was that it was "directed against the confinement of the crowd which wants to feel the sensation of its own growth again," and that "All

6 This failing of *Crowds and Power* appears much exacerbated in the volume of Canetti's "jottings" collected in *The Human Province,* translated by Joachim Neugroschel (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), where a handful of striking observations are buried in the midst of opaque aphorisms like "Voices that bewilder heaven," "All days referring to days that will never come," and "Thoughts like detritus. Thoughts like lava. Thoughts like rain."

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demands for justice and all theories of equality ultimately derive their energy from the actual experience of equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a crowd." Such passages give weight to Susan Sontag's observation that much of the book "is really a rationalist's discourse about religion."[7] And with the application of his ideas about crowds to areas beyond conscious human endeavor, Canetti's "rationalism" steps beyond the questionable into the realm of the fantastic. Thus he adduces the action of sperm swimming toward an egg as an example of the behavior of an "invisible crowd." "It is unnecessary to point out that a crowd of spermatozoa cannot be the same as a crowd of people," he concedes later in the book. But then goes on to insist that "there is undoubtedly an analogy between the two phenomena, and perhaps more than an analogy." Yet what more than an analogy can there be? The truth is, that in his eagerness to "explain the course of human history," Canetti is all too willing to distort the phenomena he treats in order to make them fit his pre-ordained schema.

In his essay on Hermann Broch in *The Conscience of Words,* Canetti tells us that in order to be truly representative of his time, a writer must possess three qualities: he must be original, he must sum up his time, and he must stand against his time. There can be no doubt that Canetti presents us with an original sensibility; nor need we question whether he stands against his time sufficiently: his work has always stood resolutely against the forces of commercialization and glib popularity. But can Canetti really be said to sum up his time? His work, especially the plays and *Auto-da-Fé,* are certainly *symptomatic* of their time. But in the end we must admit that they lack that scope and representativeness that make, say, *The Man Without Qualities* or even Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* artistic epitomes that seem to crystallize an age without being bound to it. Indeed, in attempting to place these volumes of Canetti's memoirs within his *oeuvre,* it is difficult not to conclude that his real masterpiece was not his life's work but his life, not the story of Professor Kien or the nature of crowds but his own story, the story of becoming Elias Canetti. It is for the account they give us of this absorbing story that they will be read long after *Auto-da-Fé* and *Crowds and Power* become historical curiosities.

7 "Mind as Passion," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (Vintage, 1981), pp. 181-204.

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Frits Lugt: a life in looking

by Creighton Gilbert

Frits Lugt was able, relatively early in his long life (1884-1970), to make it absolutely secure that his name would long outlive him, or that at least his initial would. He did this in the same way used by the otherwise forgotten Köchel, whose "K." is commemorated daily on concert programs because he put together a reliable catalogue of Mozart's works. The first person of this very special type was, I would think, the Viennese librarian Adam Bartsch; he recorded the engravings of artists in twenty-two little volumes, published around 1800 in French, and lives forever as "B." in the small world of private and public collectors. Of course, many others have produced catalogues of something of interest, and some were plainly aware of the value to their egos. But Lugt is different because what he catalogued was really of very minor attraction even if it was vital to those concerned; it also could have seemed impossible to catalogue in any reasonably complete way. His subject was the marks—rubber stamps and the like—which collectors apply to their prints and drawings to show ownership. There were some three thousand of them in Lugt's book published in 1921. (Typically, it too was written in French rather than in the author's native Dutch.) The book's very long title explains that it embraces the marks of dealers, museums, and individuals, whether done in ink, with blind stamps, or by hand. It is still hard to imagine putting together such a catalogue, even with a computer. In a graceful preface Lugt acknowledges those who had made stabs in this direction before, more generously than their slight achievements deserve. In the book, he does not merely identify the persons behind the marks, which are mostly monograms. He often writes a capsule article, telling what the owner's special interests were, and he often provides human touches. That is the first ray of light in what might have been the acme of dimness. It is easier to understand Lugt's method when one knows that he was of course a collector himself. And what a collector! He was speaking of his own group, almost a family, and sharing his avocation as a passion, however bloodless it may seem to the outsider. The only parallel work is Briquet's catalogue of the watermarks on old paper. That book is of fundamental usefulness to the same audience because it reports the dates of manufacture, just as Lugt reveals the history of the ownership of one's drawing or print.

Lugt's work called for a supplement, of course, and a second, equally large volume appeared in 1956. But this was neither Lugt's largest catalogue nor his most abstruse. It is surpassed on both counts by his repertory of public sales of works of art (mostly auctions) since 1600. The first volume reported 11,065 up to 1825; it was followed by two more volumes recording sales up to 1900. This work, to be sure, is not very different from many other aids to commerce, such as handbooks of coin values

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or listings of automobile models. The catalogue of marks is the one that is usually judged Lugt's masterpiece.

It obviously called for a long lead time. Indeed, at the age of eight Frits put a sign on his door announcing the "Museum Lugtius, open when the Director is home." It featured stones and snake skins. That is not so unfamiliar; we all know children who obsessively collect something and who may have overwhelming expertise about its minutiae. Industries like baseball cards and commemorative postage stamps arise to cater to them. Some children are more original, however, and some may appear as prodigies, especially if they show a continuity to later years. At twelve, Lugt began to go every afternoon after school to the print department at the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, staying until it closed; soon he was working to provide it with the catalogue it did not possess. By fifteen he had arrived at number 995 and the letter J, while also writing a life of Rembrandt. He was also getting to know adults in the same line, and at seventeen he was hired as an auctioneer's chief assistant. He started to prepare for him some of the sales catalogues he would later inventory.

This may sound all too clear, a drive easily explained by his family's background in the Mennonite church, or by his civil engineer father, and it might be of little more interest than the catalogues themselves. But of course there is much more. It would naturally be assumed that someone like this wanted from the start to collect great things, and had this ambition as a powerful dream. Most art-historical scholars have little bits of collections and often are not good at keeping a sense of proportion in judging their quality. The kind of collecting they dream of requires enough money to be free about it. Like everybody else, they think of spotting masterpieces as bargains. Lugt really did this, most typically, however, through spending a fair sum on a large batch of drawings in which there was an unsuspected treasure. He did it first in 1919, finding a wonderful figure drawing by Rubens, a woman servant, as rich as any of the artist's in centrifugal organic form but with unusual sober dignity. He did it most spectacularly in 1923, when he saw a Raphael in a lot of the same kind. He at once took it to the number one Raphael expert of the time, who was then cataloguing Raphael's drawings—the smallness of this world of specialists made it easy—and that specialist included it in his next publication the same year.

But nothing like that could produce the Lugt collection of today, with its six thousand Old Master drawings, all of which would be admired in any museum, not to mention the far larger print collection and a great deal else. Nor did Lugt get money, to any great extent, in the Berenson way, by taking commissions from millionaire collectors and otherwise turning his skill to profit. He did it through his marriage, the first of a few events outside his special pattern of life which seem almost like intrusions. He and his wife met while both were "riding on the dunes"—a sudden glimpse of Lugt as something other than a workaholic. Her family was "in coal," and her father took a supportive interest in what Lugt did. When he died in 1935 she inherited a fortune; it was as if J.P. Morgan and Berenson had been one person.

The other intrusions were simply the two world wars. Both forced total shifts in the Lugts' lives, but in both cases they came out all the better in the end. The first war was bad for the auction business, so Lugt's boss, with nine children, let him go. All this did was to make him independent, and he flourished. He was able to assemble his repertory of marks by corresponding with museums everywhere—one of the few tasks possible without the travel that was now impossible, and also possible only with the luck of his being a neutral citizen, as Lugt modestly explained later. He also became, on the small scale implied by his specialties in drawings and Dutch paintings, an adviser to other collectors. He became as well a marchand-amateur: that is, a person with a public image as an art lover in easy circumstances who may discreetly trade part-time.

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(Again, the phenomenon, like the name, was originally French.) This type is just a small variation on the publicly identified dealer who holds back his own private collection, easily assembled and often marvelous. There are many shadings here.

The Lugts lived in Holland but from soon after the first war spent much time in Paris. There he became an unpaid attaché (again a status that we have to describe in French) at the Louvre, and was soon invited to catalogue its Dutch drawings. So he began an adult version of his Rijksmuseum project that led eventually to five volumes on various Parisian public collections, and to materials for still more which were left unfinished at his death. Now he was collecting on quite a grand scale, attending sales (always with his wife) in many European capitals and making spectacular coups. In 1923, in Florence, he bought a group of about five hundred drawings which the dealer had had for almost twenty years; the dealer, in turn, had got them from a single old collection, itself a point in their favor. Lugt eventually kept only about fifty of these. Some others he simply exchanged, especially with the Albertina in Vienna, perhaps the world's greatest public collection of prints and drawings, if judged on a weighted balance of quantity and quality. In return he got engravings of which they had duplicates—second best for the Albertina but beyond the dreams of any private owner. In such ways Lugt assembled almost all Rembrandt's etchings. What he kept from the group gave him a block of late-Gothic Italian drawings, the earliest type of artist drawings that exist and perhaps the most remarkable group of that type anywhere, on the same criterion of weighted balance.

It was just as well that Lugt was independent, for he probably could not have worked well in a group, with the give and take of partial responsibility among experts. Not long after leaving the auction in Florence, he composed—with no apparent call to do so—a fiercely critical essay of a hundred pages objecting to an official Dutch government report on the future of museums and the criteria for staffing them. His key complaint was that academic scholars learn art from books by previous scholars and do not look. There is all too much truth in this contention, as when graduate students enter museums and head for the library. Lugt's opinions were much reinforced by his own experience as an expert who was self-taught, without degrees, coming up through the commercial part of the study of art, which he rightly felt was viewed condescendingly by professors. Later, the eminent Lugt was to refuse honorary degrees from two Dutch universities. For Lugt, as for Berenson, the approach to judging art of the past was through the experienced eye, feeling, and intuition. The same approach is not rare, actually, among professors and curators, who are confident that it is reliable and not subjective if one has "a good eye." How odd, one may first think, to find this exaltation of aesthetic feeling in Lugt, the supreme maker of minute catalogues. Yet the two intensities did blend, and even combined with another equally distinct from both.

In World War II the Lugts went to America, without incident. Nazi administrators sequestrated their collections, but these were largely recovered. On invitation from Wolfgang Stechow, the distinguished and amiable refugee specialist in Dutch art, the Lugts settled in Oberlin, Ohio. When they returned to Europe at the end of the war with crates of newly acquired books and runs of magazines, they also brought a more unusual, intangible trophy. This was the American concept of the foundation, which in Europe is still rare and somewhat obscure. There now began a new phase of Lugt as benefactor, persistent in the face of general disinterest. He first tried to exchange a building in Paris with the French government for his fine house in The Hague, which could have been used as the embassy. After much talk nothing happened, so he simply bought a handsome Parisian mansion and put his collections in it. This became the Fondation Custodia, which mainly organized exhibitions of drawings, naturally supervised by Lugt, who was also

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doing others for the Louvre and elsewhere. Unlike the usual American foundation, here the philanthropic donor was also the operating executive. It is as if J. P. Morgan and Thomas Hoving were one person. A fairly good parallel would be Paul J. Sachs, who collected drawings and then ran the public museum to which he gave them; but Sachs did this by joining Harvard, not by starting his own establishment. Thus Lugt branched out from the relatively narrow scope of cataloguer, collector, and dealer to become an institution, and he made his foundation a little jewel. He lost none of his previous activities (except probably the dealing, which had always been secondary), but grew into a magisterial dean of his specialty. Those who looked up to him constituted a circle wider than, but not unlike, the close and mainly friendly club of drawing specialists among whom he had moved before.

Although it was Paris where Lugt plainly found satisfaction, his beneficence also had a conspicuous result in Florence. There he established, in an agreeable suburban villa, a Dutch Institute, in which again exhibitions of Dutch drawings and the like are held. But it differs from its Parisian counterpart in that it was placed under the auspices of the united Dutch universities and has a unique function as a dormitory in which their undergraduates studying art history all spend a week or more in their first year. Was Lugt in the end pardoning the academy? Perhaps it is more likely that he was striving to reform it in the direction of looking.

Lugt's choosy skills in collecting, on a grand level, have now brought him another kind of afterlife. His institute is bringing out catalogues of the drawings owned by his foundation. It has started with the five hundred Italian drawings, perhaps because they are, as the introduction notes, "the least well known." The catalogue consists of three elegant volumes.[1] One first notices their physical handsomeness as book art—the red buckram bindings, the typography, the page layout, all agreeable to the eye with an understated luxury; and everything is done in the best way to be functional as well. All of this is accompanied by the luxuries of scholars, the dazzling seventy-page bibliography of writings "cited in abbreviated form," the tracings of some two hundred watermarks, the specialized indexes (of previous owners, of the locations of related works, of selected subjects). And then there are the catalogue entries by James Byam Shaw, a veteran of Lugt's world, a scholar whose career was largely as an art dealer. He writes with the cozy informality of one talking to equally qualified friends, secure enough to confess error and to condemn it plainly in others. "The suggestion" of one attribution "may have been mine, since" a previous owner "had bought the drawing from Colnaghi's stock" (it was at Colnaghi's that Byam Shaw long worked); "but I cannot justify it now; the types are not at all" of that artist. "I hesitate to dispute the attribution with an acknowledged authority on Italian landscape of the XVIIth century; but I believe that in this case Professor Chiarini is mistaken." And more vigorously, on a Titian: "As to its quality, I disagree emphatically with the criticism of" Specialist A, "which I am sorry to say has recently been quoted and endorsed by" Specialist B.

But of course we most want to see what the drawings are like, how many seem beautiful, or important, or unexpected, and in this we distinctly find a Lugt-collection personality. It emerges in the quite dazzling late-Gothic group already mentioned; the owner must have had in mind that they would sweep his friends off their feet. It emerges on the largest scale in a set of sixty Renaissance drawings by one artist, to which volume two is largely devoted by itself. This is the Polidoro album. Polidoro was a painter in the Raphael circle who was highly admired in his time as the finest specialist in outdoor frescoes, which appeared

1 *The Italian Drawings of the Frits Lugt Collection.* Volume I, Text, 452 pages, 117 ills. Volume II, Polidoro Album, 258 pages. Volume III, Plates, 1-512. Institut Neerlandais, Paris, 1983.

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on the fronts of Roman mansions. This whole category of painting is of course all gone. Quite a few drawings survive, but this album probably is our one best source of insight into a whole subdivision of Renaissance painting—and they are also beautiful drawings. The Lugt-collection personality emerges as well in such startling individual cases as a drawing which copies a detail in a painting by the early Renaissance painter Pollaiuolo. Contrary to what one would generally suppose about the intervening changes in taste, the copy was drawn by a master of some two generations later in Florence, Andrea del Sarto; it is something like finding Miró copying a Monet cathedral. Similarly, there are some drawings that are not quite like Guercino; these we might dismiss as the (very common) imitations of his famous procedures, until we learn that these imitations are by Joshua Reynolds.

Lugt here keeps telling us—but only with illustrations that are also beautiful—to shake up our habits, not to assume we know what art has been like, to reach more intimately into the circumstances of art—which, to be sure, all artists' preparatory drawings do in a basic way. It is in this light that we can also see perhaps his greatest Rembrandt, which represents the artist's wife Saskia in bed, waiting to give birth. In Lugt's whole collection of the letters of artists we have still another dimension, this time as if Isabella Stewart Gardner and E. H. Gombrich were the same person: the most refined of grand collectors gives us revisionist arguments about the assumptions of scholars.

But there must be also a way of seeing Lugt as a harmonious unity. One of the best clues, I think, comes through the catalogue for one of the exhibitions he did at the Louvre, whose theme was the collection of Mariette, an eighteenth-century Frenchman who is perhaps the person in history best known only for collecting. Lugt arranged the exhibition and wrote a preface in the form of a letter to Mariette. He ends it with French phrases so stable in their civilized formality that they may survive literal translation. "I have then every reason to congratulate myself that this exhibition may have provided me with the occasion to repay a debt of respect to you, and to assure you of the perfect sincerity with which I have the honor to be, my very dear patron, your very humble and very obedient great-grandson." It is an autobiographical confession in the most unexpected form and locus, but it moves us nevertheless. The definition of Lugt needs to be French, but I think it is not so much "amateur accompli," as has been suggested, as simply "connoisseur." Lugt's relation to art is in his knowing it, not as a savant, but in the special sense of one who is acquainted, in every way. If one *connait* fully, one's work will include making the supporting catalogues, even catalogues of marks (just as the connoisseur Berenson is most immortal for his lists); it will include buying and owning and grouping in exhibitions and cataloguing, and always observing. And the complete connoisseur, however acquisitive, does things that teach, things that make the rest of us observe. Happy Lugt, for his incredibly satisfying life, and for a posthumous benefaction that he must have known would be the most satisfying of all.

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Salinger's arrested development

by Bruce Bawer

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things."
—I Corinthians 13:11

Though his only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye,* is one of the sturdiest best-sellers of the post-World War II era—a staple of high-school English courses, and a standard according to which every newly published tale of tortured adolescence is inevitably judged—Jerome David Salinger is probably as famous for his elusiveness as for his work. He has been called "the Greta Garbo of American literature," and the more one thinks about it, the more appropriate the epithet seems to be. As Garbo's early retirement into seclusion was triggered by the disastrous reception of her movie *Two-Faced Woman,* so Salinger's decision to go into personal and professional hiding appears to have been provoked by the refusal of both the reviewers and the public to approve of the direction in which his last book—*"Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters" and "Seymour: An Introduction"* (two stories published together in 1963)—indicated he was developing. As in the case of Garbo, though, Salinger's insistence upon being left alone served only to increase the public's curiosity about him, thus preserving his celebrity status throughout a long period of professional inactivity; indeed, it might reasonably be argued that his love of privacy has, in the years since his departure from the active literary scene, made him a "legend" in a way that his work alone could never have done. Four decades after Salinger vouchsafed *Catcher* to the world, *Gatsby*-like gossip about the master's past, present, and future activities continues to make the rounds, and curious folk still make the pilgrimage to his Cornish, New Hampshire, sanctuary in hopes of glimpsing him through a hole in the fence. In short—and herein lies the ultimate irony in this most bizarre set of circumstances—it is precisely his fanatically enforced privacy that, more than anything else, has helped to place J. D. Salinger's life and not his writing at the focus of public scrutiny.

Given this state of affairs, it seems likely that Ian Hamilton's forthcoming para-biography, *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life,* will generate an enormous amount of interest.[1] I call it a "para-biography" because to use the word "biography," in this instance, would be egregiously misleading. Mr. Hamilton, a distinguished English poet who brought

1 *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life,* by Ian Hamilton; Random House, $17.95. [Editor's note: Originally scheduled for August publication, *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life* has now been postponed. According to *Publishers Weekly* of July 11, 1986, "J. D. Salinger's lawyers have questioned biographer Ian Hamilton's right to use certain quoted material in the book . . . and have delayed the August publication . . . ." At this writing, no new publication date has been announced.]

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forth a solid if somewhat fact-happy life of Robert Lowell four years ago, has simply been unable to gather enough material to produce a full-fledged biography of Salinger. This is not to say that the book lacks detail. Indeed, it is altogether too plentifully stocked with gratuitous trivia—with, for example, quotations from the movie reviews Salinger contributed to his college newspaper and bits and pieces of every letter (apparently) that Hamilton could get his hands on. What the book is short on, however, is detail that is illuminating and appropriate. Though Hamilton usefully summarizes Salinger's literary career—giving us synopses, reviews, contract arrangements—he does not even come close to providing a vivid, coherent rendering of Salinger's life. The subject never really comes into focus. And the scraps of personal material that Hamilton *has* been able to collect—most of which concern Salinger's life in military school, college, and the army (the three periods when he was forced, day and night, into the company of others)—are frequently either misconstrued or overanalyzed. (Most of this information has previously appeared in print anyway, notably in *J. D. Salinger* by Warren French, the revised edition of which appeared in 1976 from Twayne Publishers.)

Stylistically, the book is a disappointment. The prose lacks fastidiousness; grammatical errors abound. The most annoying stylistic feature is the constant and inexplicable—and often very awkward—shifting of tense. More important, Hamilton sometimes draws unwarranted conclusions from highly tenuous bits of evidence—a habit that he evinces in the very first lines of the book. "J. D. Salinger," he writes, "has often said that he 'started writing at the age of fifteen,' as if this was when, for him, real life began." That, to my mind, is a most peculiar "as if"; certainly most of Salinger's fiction suggests that, much to the contrary, real life *ended* for him at the age of fifteen. But Hamilton's reason for beginning his book with such a slippery piece of logic soon becomes clear: having discovered next to nothing about Salinger's first fifteen years, he wishes to justify that period's almost complete omission from the book by underrating its importance to Salinger's development. For Hamilton's coverage of Salinger's youth consists of little more than an assortment of vital statistics. We learn that Salinger's mother was Irish; that his father, Sol, an importer of cheese and ham, was a Jew, born in Chicago in 1888, apparently a willful sort, perhaps the son of a Cleveland rabbi; and that the writer's only sibling is a sister, Doris, fully eight years his senior. We gather also that the cheese and ham importing business flourished during the writer's boyhood, for the family kept moving, in those years, to increasingly affluent neighborhoods. When Jerome was born on New Year's Day in 1919, the Salingers lived far uptown, at 3681 Broadway; later that year they moved to 113th Street; by 1928 they were at 221 West Eighty-second; and four years afterwards they took occupancy of an apartment on Park Avenue at Ninety-first Street. In his early years Jerome attended public schools; later he transferred to the McBurney School on West Sixty-fourth Street, where he accumulated a below-average academic record, reported for the school paper, and earned enthusiastic notices for his performances (invariably in female roles) in school plays. And that, essentially, is all that Hamilton gives us on the childhood of a writer whose fiction is enigmatically obsessed with the theme of childhood—whose entire *oeuvre* cries out for a biographer able to shed some light on the reasons for its strange fixation.

It is not till Salinger reaches military school that we begin to get a picture of him—albeit a fuzzy one. At age fifteen, Hamilton tells us, Jerome was suddenly plucked out of McBurney and enrolled in the Valley Forge Military Academy in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where he continued to write and act. (Because his application to the academy was "hastily filled out" by his father, Hamilton deduces that Sol was, for some reason or other, "out of patience" with Jerome; and he uses this conclusion, in turn, to support his hypothesis that father and

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son didn't get along well.) Salinger, who appears to have been the Oscar Wilde of Valley Forge, is remembered by former classmates for his "sardonic wit," "sizzling wisecracks," and "sophistication and humor." "He always talked in a pretentious manner," recalls one former cadet, "as if he were reciting something from Shakespeare." "His conversation," remembers another, "was frequently laced with sarcasm about others and the silly routines we had to obey and follow at school." To his friends at Valley Forge, most of whom were small-town Pennsylvania boys, Salinger was the "big city boy" who "knew about Broadway shows, and read *The New Yorker* and *Esquire*," and who dreamed of writing movies in Hollywood. A telling example of Hamilton's tendency to cover less-than-crucial material at excessive length is his discussion of the 1936 Valley Forge yearbook, of which Salinger was the literary editor. Hamilton devotes several pages to an overly ingenious analysis of the yearbook's utterly routine contents, which he assumes were entirely the work of Salinger. Hamilton purports to detect a subtle irony in the yearbook, and in his defense of this notion he seems (not for the only time, either) to employ circular logic. If, he argues, Salinger wrote the effusive Class History, the fawning tribute to the school's founder, and the pious Class Song, then surely they are meant to be, on their deepest level, parodic; if so, then surely they are by Salinger. Having thus established that the young Salinger was simultaneously sycophantic and insubordinate, Hamilton proceeds to draw a parallel between this apparent two-faced quality of the writer-to-be and the combination of nonconformity and submissiveness that characterizes Holden Caulfield, the boy hero of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

At times, it should be noted, Hamilton does make too deliberate an attempt to identify Caulfieldian traits in young Jerome. Yet the fact remains that there *are* a surprising number of parallels between Salinger's life at Valley Forge and Holden's life at the fictional Pencey Prep. Hamilton informs us, for instance, that there actually was a boy at Valley Forge who, like James Castle in *The Catcher in the Rye,* fell to his death from a dormitory window; that at Valley Forge, Salinger, like Holden Caulfield, chronically used the expression "a prince of a guy" to describe people he disliked; that Salinger's roommate, Ned Davis, was apparently the model for Holden's narcissistic roommate Stradlater; and that one night Salinger "became so impossibly drunk and 'Holden Caulfield-ish,' vowing to break out of the school once and for all, that a close friend had to fell him with a knockout punch to prevent him from waking the militia."

Like Holden, too, Salinger was (to use a word that is nearly ubiquitous in his fiction) something of a "phony." Following his graduation from Valley Forge, a year at New York University (though he left "no trace of ever having been there"), a job entertaining the passengers on a cruise ship, and several months in Vienna on business for his father, Salinger entered Ursinus College, where he proceeded to behave like a full-blown snob. His purported reason for attending Ursinus —a science-oriented Pennsylvania school whose students were principally middle-class Pennsylvania Dutch locals—was that "he needed a quiet place to write." But why Ursinus? Hamilton surmises that it may have been easier for Salinger to get into than other colleges: since it was near Valley Forge, perhaps "some local strings were pulled" to get Salinger in. Yet one has the feeling that Ursinus—rather than, say, NYU or Columbia or some other Ivy League university—filled a crucial need for Salinger in that it provided a place where he could feel superior to, and easily get away with patronizing, his fellow students. Indeed, after several years of being the "big city boy" at Valley Forge, he may well have found it intolerable being just another cell in the NYU student body. At Ursinus, as the memories of his classmates demonstrate, he played to the hilt the part of the rich cosmopolite, the experienced world traveller, the gifted great-writer-to-be. He conducted

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himself, apparently, as if he were better than everyone and everything around him; in a school full of students who considered college education a privilege and who felt (in the words of one of them) that they "had to make the best possible use of it and had the obligation to pass on to others as much as possible," Salinger's arrogant indifference to such matters as classroom attendance (his arch, *New Yorker*-ish campus newspaper column was called "Skipped Diploma") was by itself enough to win him notoriety. If the girls admired him for his veneer of worldly sophistication (not to mention his height and good looks), the other boys envied him these attributes. Yet he kept his distance, and former classmates remember him primarily as a "loner," underneath whose flashy image one or two of them were insightful enough to perceive a boy who, like Holden, was at bottom confused and disturbed by the grown-up world and not quite certain how to make a place for himself in it. "When we knew Jerry," recalls Frances Glassmoyer (whose name inspired that of Salinger's character Franny Glass), "he *was* Holden Caulfield, although when *The Catcher in the Rye* burst in upon the literary world, he expressed surprise when I recognized him as Holden. I guess he never knew his adolescence was showing."

Plainly, Salinger's "phoniness," his supercilious air, was a sign of insecurity. But why was he so insecure? Born into a family that lived on a modest block of upper Broadway, did he feel out of place in the Park Avenue apartment that his family had moved into when he was thirteen? Did the other young men in his New York set, most of whom had presumably been born into their wealth, intimidate him? Did he refuse to take school seriously because he was secretly afraid of not doing well enough? Did he, indeed, play the part of the sophisticated New Yorker at Ursinus precisely because, when he *was* in New York, he felt relatively *un*sophisticated? One begins to think so. Hamilton, who appears to identify with Salinger's contempt for the Ursinus crowd, has little or nothing to say on these matters, except to observe that whereas "[o]utside New York the young Salinger could pose as a sophisticate," in the city itself "there must always have been a Scott Fitzgerald-style discomfiture about his college pedigree: who else did he, or anybody, know who had been schooled at Valley Forge and polished at Ursinus, Collegeville?" But one suspects that Salinger's discomfiture preceded his years at Ursinus and even at Valley Forge—that, in fact, a nagging sense of being inferior to the born-and-bred Park Avenue types may go some way toward explaining his calculated phoniness in the company of his Pennsylvania schoolmates.

Whatever the case may be, it is clear at least that leaving college and entering the literary world did not stop Salinger from looking down his nose at one and all. Though his first stories were obviously manufactured for a middlebrow audience and saw publication, to his delight, in such well-paying and widely circulated "slicks" as *The Saturday Evening Post, Collier's,* and *Esquire* (as well as *Story,* whose founding editor Whit Burnett was an early mentor), Salinger's thrill at being published in their pages soon gave way to haughty disapproval of every little detail of their *modus operandi.*[2] The *Post* in particular irritated him by changing his stories' titles and illustrating them with silly drawings; though this sort of thing was standard practice, a few such experiences were enough to make Salinger dispatch an angry letter to Burnett saying that he was no longer going to write for the "slicks." In later years, his disdain would continually attach itself, in like fashion and upon similar grounds—margin size, cover design, jacket photograph, typeface, advertising copy, binding—to one book publisher after another; so strong was his feeling about such matters that in several cases his objections to publishers' handling of his

2 A total of twenty-one Salinger stories, published in the "slicks" between 1940 and 1948, have never been allowed by Salinger to appear in book form. Almost all of these stories are contrived productions of little or no literary interest.

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work caused Salinger to break off longstanding personal and professional relationships. (Similarly, after seeing the results of the sale of *Catcher* and "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" to—respectively—the Book-of-the-Month Club and Samuel Goldwyn, he forbade the future sale of his work to book clubs and film studios.)

Joining these institutions in Salinger's disesteem were those individuals whom he looked upon as "professional" readers—that is, English professors and literary critics. Referring to a controversy between Sinclair Lewis and the critic Bernard De Voto over the merits of Lewis's novel *Arrowsmith,* Salinger observed that De Voto was probably in the right but had "no right to be right"; in a just world, novelists like Lewis would be criticized not by "small-time" opinionizers like De Voto but "by men of their own size"—by, that is, writers of fiction. (In opposition to the professional reader, naturally, Salinger placed the "amateur reader," to whom, in part, he dedicated his last book.) Salinger also looked down upon women. According to Hamilton, "there were two kinds of girls: those he despised immediately and those he fell in love with and afterwards semidespised." Salinger's references to women in his letters are almost invariably patronizing: he describes them as "little girls" or "little numbers"; his girlfriend Oona O'Neill (who later married Charlie Chaplin) is referred to as "little Oona." Even his fellow servicemen, during his World War Two stint in the Counter Intelligence Corps, did not earn his respect; he treated them with what Hamilton describes as a "sour or condescending aloofness."

There is, then, a long list of individuals, groups, and institutions that Salinger seems to have looked upon with scorn. Alas, so catholic was his contempt that it would probably be wrong to leave his own name off the list. For it seems probable that, in addition to everyone else, Salinger despised himself—and did so, in large part, for the same reason that Holden Caulfield despised himself: because, though he looked down upon the fashionable and phony, he couldn't resist the temptation to be himself a member of the fashionable and phony crowd. Holden speaks of his classmates at Pencey Prep as having "this goddamn secret fraternity that I was too yellow not to join." To Salinger, the Park Avenue set, Eugene O'Neill's daughter, and Harold Ross's magazine were, taken together, exactly this—a "secret fraternity" that he saw through but was too yellow, too insecure, not to strive to be (or, at least, to pretend to be) a part of. For him, it was somehow never possible to live normally, in equality and friendliness, among his fellow adults; he had either to move among them with a haughty superciliousness—all the while hating himself for doing so—or to keep apart from them altogether.

It should hardly be surprising that a man who found it so hard to relate maturely to his peers should have created a body of work that is distinguished primarily by its nostalgia for childhood and its hostility toward the conventions and responsibilities of adult life. In "Franny," a college girl who can't cope with adulthood suffers a nervous breakdown; in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," a woman collapses in anguish over her sweet, spent youth; in "Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters," a young man who is "too happy" to marry deserts his fiancée on their wedding day; in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," the same young man, having married after all, has a wistful encounter at the beach with a small girl and kills himself immediately after in his hotel room, while his wife sleeps nearby; and in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," a soldier driven to a nervous breakdown by the horrors of the adult world is redeemed by a child's affection. And so it goes in Salinger's fiction: one protagonist after another finds communication with grownups difficult or unfulfilling and is drawn instead to children. Some of the resulting encounters (Holden and his sister Phoebe, Sergeant X and Esmé) are among the most poignant episodes in Salinger's fiction; some are just plain weird.

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None of these fictional episodes, however, is quite as odd as a story that Hamilton tells about Salinger. Within weeks after relocating, in 1953, to his present modest residence in the small town of Cornish, New Hampshire (a move that recalls Holden Caulfield's escapist dream of living in a cabin by a brook), Salinger befriended a number of high-school students; they were, it seems, not protégés or admirers so much as they were "pals" whom he regularly attended football games with, consorted with at a local coffee shop, and entertained frequently at his house. "He was just like one of the gang," one of these young people later remembered. (One immediately thinks of Holden's dream of being in a field of rye with numberless children: "Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me.") This most peculiar idyll was ended when two of Salinger's young friends interviewed him for the high-school page of the Claremont *Daily Eagle* and the interview appeared not on the high-school page but in the front of the paper, as an *Eagle* "scoop." Apparently feeling betrayed, Salinger proceeded, in a striking display of childishness, to sever his ties with all of the students; very soon afterwards, he had a high fence constructed around his house.

Why? One has the impression that Salinger's teenaged interviewers, by behaving too much like grownup reporters, violated his sentimental illusions about youth. His fiction makes it plain that Salinger enjoys thinking of young people as magically wise and innocent beings, immune from the phony erudition, the sneaky cleverness, and the moral corruption that plague adults. Not that the children in Salinger's fiction are Rebeccas of Sunnybrook Farm; on the contrary, they are almost invariably smart, fresh, precocious (sometimes quite improbably so), and just this side of obnoxious. Nevertheless, time and again it is children, in Salinger's work, that embody goodness and decency and a sort of great and simple cosmic knowingness. Consider, for instance, "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," one of his two or three most accomplished stories, which was originally published in 1950 in *The New Yorker* and reprinted in *Nine Stories* (1954). The protagonist tells us that he is writing the story in honor of the forthcoming wedding of a young lady whom he met six years earlier, during World War Two, when she was a thirteen-year-old English girl and he was a young American soldier stationed in Devon. He first saw her singing in a church choir, and met her a few minutes later in a tearoom; a titled and conspicuously well-to-do war orphan, she was friendly, forward, articulate, and rather snobbish ("You seem quite intelligent for an American," she said). After telling him about her dead parents, of whom she spoke in an extremely affectionate but formal manner, she asked him to write a short story for her—"I prefer stories," she said, "about squalor"—and then bade him goodbye, hoping that he would return from the war "with all your faculties intact." The second half of the story finds the soldier (who now refers to himself as "Sergeant X") in Bavaria, a few weeks after V-E Day, headquartered in a house that once belonged to a Nazi woman. A book in the house contains the handwritten inscription (in German): "Dear God, life is hell"; the soldier, who has suffered a nervous breakdown and seems to be in desperate emotional straits, appends, in English, a postscript from Dostoevsky: "Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love." Then, after he tosses a few disaffected, patronizing jokes at a dumb-but-amiable corporal named Clay (the same sort of jokes, by the way, that Zooey Glass will wound his mother with in "Zooey"), the soldier receives a sweet letter, delayed a year or so in transit, from Esmé, with which she encloses her late father's watch, its crystal broken. Suddenly, thanks to the letter, the soldier feels sleepy, "almost ecstatically" sleepy, for the first time; we are meant to understand that this turn of events is a hopeful one indeed, for "you take a really sleepy man, Esmé, and he *al*ways stands a chance of again becoming a man with all his fac—with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact."

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If "Esmé" is among Salinger's finer stories, it is largely because the protagonist's antipathy for adult life is understandable—he has seen, in the horrors of war, the evils of which the human soul is capable—and because the girl is charmingly drawn. But the change effected in the soldier by Esmé's affectionate letter is, alas, less than thoroughly plausible. A widely overlooked detail in the story is that the soldier (unlike Salinger, who in many other ways is clearly his prototype) has a wife back home in the States—a wife who has, apparently, been unable to do for his emotional stability what this child, a virtual stranger, has accomplished with a single letter. Viewed from this perspective, the story seems to say less about the redemptive power of children's innocent love than (unintentionally) about the ability of intelligent and perceptive writers to deceive themselves with sentimental conceits.

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish" (1948), also reprinted in *Nine Stories,* similarly contrasts the heaven of children's love with the hell of the adult world. Like "Esmé," the story falls into two distinct parts. In the first, we meet Muriel, a young wife in a Florida beach hotel, who, after reading a women's magazine article titled "Sex is Fun—or Hell," speaks by telephone to her mother in New York. Like most of the women in Salinger's fiction, both Muriel and her mother are superficial, insensitive, gabby, their dialogue peppered with references to fancy Manhattan stores. The subject of their conversation is Muriel's disturbed husband, Seymour Glass, who has been in a mental hospital, who has dubbed Muriel "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948," and who (the mother fears) "may completely lose control of himself" during the vacation. Her authority for this pronouncement is a psychiatrist with whom Muriel's father has consulted (like many obtuse and callous characters in Salinger, these women believe religiously in modern psychiatry). One thing that the women find particularly "awful" and "sad" about Seymour is his extraordinary enthusiasm for a certain twentieth-century German poet (unnamed, but indubitably Rilke). From Muriel's hotel room we move to the beach, where Seymour chats about olives and Little Black Sambo with a toddler named Sybil (who calls him "see more") and then takes the child into the ocean to catch "bananafish." "This is a *perfect* day for bananafish," he tells her, and proceeds to explain that bananafish "lead a very tragic life," chasing down bananas in bananaholes and eating so many that they can't get out again, eventually perishing of banana fever. Leaving Sybil in the water, Seymour returns to his hotel room, sees Muriel lying on the bed, pulls a gun out of a suitcase, and shoots himself in the head.

The story has considerable strengths: the style is vivid, the structure taut, the interlude with Sybil both charming and disquieting. (Note that "Bananafish" is, in a way, "Esmé" in reverse: the first half demonstrates the grim reality of adult life, the second presents a friendly encounter between an adult and a child.) But what are we supposed to make of it all? Apparently we are meant to recognize in Seymour a sensitive soul who can "see more" profoundly than the common herd into the heart of man's darkness, and who is consequently incapable of living comfortably in the crude and callous world of adults; like a bananafish, he has taken in too much—has, that is, overloaded his fragile psyche—and feels trapped, isolated, doomed. Yet the more closely one examines the story, the more one comes to recognize it as a facile (albeit very well executed) exercise in what may be called suicide chic. Salinger's empathy, one cannot help but notice, is not distributed as evenly as his attention: we are expected to understand and identify with Seymour—to take his side, as it were, against the phony adult world—yet Salinger is not at all concerned with having us understand or sympathize with Muriel's view of things. Though we are meant to forgive Seymour's considerable flaws (egocentrism, irresponsibility, cruelty, intellectual snobbery) as the understandable reaction of a helpless, delicate soul to the adult world, we are meant to see in Muriel's flaws an indication of how vicious and vapid that world can

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be. This blinkered vision is typical of Salinger's stories. Continually they suggest to us that it's Salinger, the protagonist, perhaps an innocent child or two, and we the readers (the *amateur* readers, anyway) against everybody else of voting age. That some children can be as reprehensible as some adults is never acknowledged. And there's hardly any indication in these stories that human frailties can not only divide us but bind us together—that they can, in fact, help make us look into each other and see ourselves, and take strength.

The Catcher in the Rye (1951), Salinger's only novel, was a long time in the making. The name Caulfield (which the declared movie-hater Salinger borrowed from his favorite movie star, Joan Caulfield) appears in several early stories; Vincent Caulfield, in "The Last Day of the Last Furlough," published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1944, has a younger brother named Holden. Two Holden Caulfield stories that were forerunners of *Catcher* appeared during the 1940s. One was accepted by *The New Yorker* in 1941 but was never published in its original form; a revised version, titled "Slight Rebellion Off Madison," appeared there five years later. The other, "I'm Crazy" (consisting essentially of Holden's leave-taking of Mr. Spencer and of the episode in Phoebe's bedroom), was printed in *Collier's* in 1945. (A descriptive tag billed it as "The heartwarming story of a kid whose only fault lay in understanding people so well that most of them were baffled by him and only a very few would believe in him.")

If *Catcher* is Salinger's single most effective published work, it is largely because in its pages he is more objective than usual, more distanced from and clear-headed about his protagonist's solipsism. It is also partly because, in this case, for once, the Salinger protagonist who despises adult life and longs for childhood is not a young adult with an acute case of arrested development; rather, he is himself a child (or, more correctly, a boy at the threshold of manhood) whose vanity, unreason, and unconscious hypocrisy—and whose anguish and confusion over his vanishing innocence—are more easily forgivable, and less severely psychopathic, than they would be in a young man a few years older.

The story of *Catcher* is perhaps the best known in postwar American literature. Holden Caulfield is sixteen, the middle child of a wealthy corporate lawyer and his wife whose family occupies half of a floor in an apartment building near Central Park; he's lately sprouted up very quickly to a height of six feet two-and-a-half inches and has just been expelled from his fourth prep school, Pencey Prep in Agerstown, Pennsylvania, for failing four out of five subjects. (He passed English.) Since he doesn't want to remain at Pencey for the last few days remaining in the autumn semester (he's "lonesome" there), and can't bring himself to face his parents before the news of his dismissal reaches them by mail, he leaves school abruptly on a Saturday night in December and spends the next two days and nights gadding around Manhattan. During this brief but intense odyssey he gets shaken down in a seedy hotel by a prostitute named Sunny and a pimp named Maurice; has drinks with a sometime school buddy (who describes his ex-girlfriend as "the whore of New Hampshire"); tries unsuccessfully to persuade his friend Sally Hayes to escape with him to some place far away where they can live simply and anonymously; and runs to an ex-teacher, Mr. Antolini, for refuge only to have the man put the moves on him. In the course of narrating the events of this lost weekend (or, as he puts it, "this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas"), Holden manages to describe nearly everything he comes across—and virtually everybody older than he is—as "corny" or "phony" or "depressing." He is, as his little sister Phoebe complains, down on everything: "You don't like *any*thing that's happening." The only people he really loves, or can even tolerate, it seems, are Phoebe and his older brother D. B., a Hollywood screenwriter. (His father is also in show business, after a fashion: he invests frequently in

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Broadway plays.) To be sure, he has a touching affection for the occasional odd, innocent, and seemingly insignificant memory. For example, when he discovers that his roommate, a make-out artist named Stradlater, is about to go on a date with a friend of his, Jane Gallagher, he remembers fondly how, when he and Jane used to play checkers, "She wouldn't move any of her kings. What she'd do, when she'd get a king, she wouldn't move it. She'd just leave it in the back row. She'd get them all lined up in the back row. Then she'd never use them. She just liked the way they looked when they were in the back row." At sixteen he's already crippled by nostalgia.

Like Seymour Glass and other Salinger protagonists, Holden doesn't want any part of a world which seems to him an obscene place full of prevarication and pretentiousness. But he is a Salinger hero with a difference. Instead of painting him as some sort of mad, sainted isolato, Salinger makes it plain that Holden is an essentially normal teenager, temporarily disturbed, who is himself guilty of many of the things for which he faults others. Though he claims to hate movies, for instance, he has seen *The 39 Steps* ten times; though he calls himself a pacifist, he physically attacks his Pencey roommate Stradlater for seducing Jane Gallagher; though he criticizes his schoolmates for their "lousy manners," he, for his part, is frequently rude and insulting; though he hates dishonesty, he admits himself to be "the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life"; and though he is repulsed by "big snobs," he acknowledges having chosen to room with Stradlater on account of his wealth and sneers at the provincial ignorance of three young Seattle women whom he meets at a seedy New York hotel. It is, in short, the obvious unreliability of many of Holden's negative impressions that gives the book a levelheadedness that many of Salinger's stories lack.

Holden is a boy possessed by memories; and the memory that haunts him most of all is that of his late brother Allie, whose death three years earlier appears to have much to do with his present emotional disturbance. Holden recalls that soon after Allie's death, his parents almost had him psychoanalyzed because, in his despair, he broke all the windows in the garage of their summer house in Maine. Though three years have passed, death—not only Allie's death but mortality itself—continues to prey upon his mind. Throughout *Catcher,* old people (Mr. Spencer; a visiting Pencey alumnus; the characters played by Lunt and Fontanne in *I Know My Love*) disconcert and depress him; on more than one occasion he mentions his own tombstone, upon which he imagines someone writing an obscenity. If Holden has no interest in becoming a responsible and mature adult, it seems to be largely because he knows that adulthood leads to death—and death is something with which he has simply not come to terms. Though it has been driven home to him in the past couple of years that he lives in a world of sinfulness and mortality, he has not yet accepted his inability to escape either of these things, and the force and fierceness with which childhood has been taken from him (his brother's demise, his speedy growth) have made it increasingly difficult for him to respond to life with anything but aimless panic, a desperate fear of the future, and an unmodulated, undifferentiated attachment to the past. At the end of the novel he says:

> D. B. asked me what I thought about all this stuff I just finished telling you about. I didn't know what the hell to say. If you want to know the truth, I don't *know* what I think about it. I'm sorry I told so many people about it. About all I know is, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.

This is, for a Salinger protagonist, an unusual sort of despair; it is the despair not of a grown-up neurotic or psychopath who refuses to face adulthood, but of a troubled

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boy—a boy for whom we must feel sympathy and with whom (in some small way, at least) we cannot help but identify. It is, indeed, the poignant credibility of Holden Caulfield that is largely responsible for *The Catcher in the Rye*'s being not only Salinger's best single published work but also one of the few small classics of postwar American fiction.

Between 1954, when *Nine Stories* was issued, and 1965, when Salinger ceased publishing fiction, a total of five Salinger stories saw print. All five appeared in *The New Yorker,* and all five are about a family named Glass, the oldest of whose seven children, Seymour, had already been introduced—and killed off—in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Like Holden, the Glass children with whom Salinger is most concerned are emotional cripples, aloof and superior in their relation to the adult world. It's a situation which might be very compelling but for the fact that Salinger seems to identify much too strongly with them, and thus tends to present them not as pathetic, maladjusted misfits but as romantic egoists who are incalculably finer and more fascinating (not to mention more brilliant and beautiful) than regular folk. The first of these stories, the sharp, lively "Franny" (1955), takes place several years after Seymour's suicide and concerns the nervous breakdown that Franny Glass, a college student who is Seymour's youngest sister, suffers when she visits her boyfriend Lane Coutell on his campus the weekend of the Yale game. Like Holden Caulfield, Franny is mightily displeased by the human race—whose manifold uglinesses she'd apparently never had a good look at before going away to college. She tells Lane that she is "just so sick of pedants and conceited little tearer-downers I could scream"; her poet-professors aren't "*real* poets. They're just people that write poems that get published and anthologized all over the place, but they're not *poets* . . . . If you're a poet, you do something beautiful!" Like Holden, she has unreasonable and romantic expectations of her fellow human beings: "I'm sick of just liking people. I wish to God I could meet somebody I could respect." And: "I'm just sick of ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else's. I'm sick of everybody that wants to *get* somewhere, do something distinguished and all, be somebody interesting. It's disgusting—it is, it *is.* I don't care what anybody says." (As should be clear by now, Franny even *talks* like Holden, peppering her conversation liberally with the expressions "you know," "I mean," "God," "goddam," and "and all.")

Franny, in short, is a noble-minded, idealistic young lady who is unable to accept the compromises and the imperfections—and, it should be added, the raw, ugly *sexuality*—of adulthood. Lane, neatly enough for the story's purposes, is her exact opposite, all untempered ego and sex: he brags obnoxiously about the possibility of publishing a paper he wrote for an English course (unlike Franny, he's more interested in publishing his ideas than in the ideas themselves) and complains pretentiously about Flaubert's lack of "testicularity." Like "Bananafish," then, "Franny" centers upon a contrast between the two leading characters, one of whom is a sensitive Glass and the other of whom is an unfeeling fool who likes to listen to himself talk; as in the earlier story, Salinger clearly wants us to sympathize with the former and to see in the latter the personification of the world's obtuseness and insensitivity. But once again he has loaded the dice to a ridiculous extent, depicting his well-adjusted character as a self-important lout—as if to say that this is the only sort of person who can function smoothly in society. (As in "Bananafish," one cannot help but wonder what these two extraordinarily incompatible people ever saw in one another.)

The principal difference between Holden Caulfield and Franny Glass is religion. In *Catcher,* there are few explicit references to it; the most memorable one is Holden's coffee-shop encounter with a couple of nuns, whom, once or twice afterwards, he has a vague desire to see again. That's the extent of Holden's interest in religion. Franny is something else again. Running

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away from the world, she dives into the arms of God; fervently she tells Lane (who is, naturally, a devout Freudian) about the power of prayer, claiming that if you keep repeating the name of God, "You get to see God." She's been reading a book, she tells him, called *The Way of a Pilgrim,* about a man who walks "all over Russia, looking for somebody who can tell him *how* to pray incessantly." Eventually she goes to the ladies' room and collapses.

That is the end of "Franny," but not of the chronicle of Franny's nervous collapse. Salinger picks up the action the following morning in "Zooey" (1957), which is four times as long as its predecessor and was reprinted with it in *Franny and Zooey* (1961). The style of the second story represents a distinct falling-off from the crispness of the first; Salinger opens with a windy, self-indulgent passage in which the narrator introduces himself as the writer Buddy Glass, Franny's oldest living brother and apparently one of the more stable members of the seven-sibling Glass clan. (As we learn later in the story, Buddy, like Salinger, lives in the woods "like a *her*mit.") Apropos of the story's wordiness, Buddy explains that "We are, all four of us [Buddy, Zooey, Franny, and their mother Bessie], blood relatives, and we speak a kind of esoteric, family language, a sort of semantic geometry in which the shortest distance between any two points is a fullish circle." It is an apt warning, for "Zooey" and the stories that follow it are plagued by an increasingly bizarre, frustrating, and nearly pathological logorrhea; it is as if they were written not only of and by, but even exclusively *for,* the Glass children, as if Salinger/Buddy were trying to keep the rest of us out of the lives of this family that he has created for himself by erecting an all but insurmountable lexical fence around them.

The beginning of the story proper finds twenty-five-year-old Zooey, the youngest Glass boy, sitting in "a very full bath" in his parents' Manhattan apartment, where he and Franny still live; in this womb-like environment, he is reading a four-year-old letter from Buddy. Zooey, we are told, is a successful television actor, small, slight, and "surpassingly handsome," who has been fighting "a private war against narcissism . . . since he was seven or eight years old," and who as a child appeared regularly on a radio quiz show called "It's a Wise Child." Indeed, between 1927 and 1943, all seven of the Glass children were, at one time or another, regular panelists on the program; all won reputations as prodigies, but none was so impressive as the brilliant eldest son, Seymour, who, with Buddy, went on to play tutor to the family's two youngest members, Zooey and Franny. Buddy recalls in his letter how he and Seymour wanted them to "know who and what Jesus and Gautama and Lao-tse and Shankaracharya and Hui-neng and Sri Ramakrishna, etc., were before you knew too much or anything about Homer or Shakespeare or even Blake or Whitman, let alone George Washington and his cherry tree or the definition of a peninsula or how to parse a sentence." We are to understand that it is because of (a) that quiz show, (b) the army of "child psychologists and professional educators" who "voraciously examined, interviewed, and poked at" them (especially Zooey) throughout their childhood, and (c) Seymour and Buddy's offbeat metaphysical teachings, that Franny and Zooey are unstable and alienated and even more obsessed with the past than the rest of the family. As Zooey tells his mother: "This whole goddam house stinks of ghosts . . . . We're *freaks,* the two of us, Franny and I . . . and both those bastards [Seymour and Buddy] are responsible."

Indeed, though he's been dead for seven years, Seymour *is* rather responsible for Franny's breakdown. The books she's been reading (not only *The Way of a Pilgrim* but its sequel, *The Pilgrim Continues His Way*) are from Seymour's room; their aim, as Zooey explains to his mother, is "to wake everybody up to the need and *bene*fits of saying the Jesus Prayer incessantly . . . . The idea being that if you call out the name long enough and regularly enough and *lit*erally from the heart, sooner or later you'll get an

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answer. Not exactly an *an*swer. A *response.*" To be specific, the prayer, endlessly reiterated, brings enlightenment; one enters "the reality of things," achieves "pure consciousness"—which is to say that one utterly escapes the false reality of a world full of fools. This is a consummation for which not only Franny but Buddy and (in his time) Seymour have devoutly wished. Toward the end of the story, after Franny complains to Zooey (much as Holden does to Phoebe) about how despicable people are, he tells her—and this seems to be the moral of the piece, if moral there be—that if there aren't any people in the world for whose sake it is worth making an effort at life, she should live and work and strive for God's sake, because He's always out there watching. Obviously, we are supposed to admire and be moved by the Glass children's preoccupation with spiritual purity and incessant prayerfulness. But it's hard not to see it all as self-destructive, psychopathic, fanatical; hard not to be disturbed by Salinger's, and the Glasses', blithe equation of religion and misanthropy. It is also difficult not to be irritated by that precious, tiresome, and most labored piece of fictional machinery, the late lamented children's radio quiz show "It's a Wise Child"—which is, after all, simply a facile contrivance designed to account, in one fell swoop, for an entire family's emotional delinquency. It demonstrates that Salinger is more interested in having a family of incurably childlike adults to play with on paper than he is in trying to figure out how people like that *really* get to be that way or how they might manage to become (horrors!) emotionally healthy adults.

In "Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters" (1955), Salinger jumps back in time. The story takes place on the day of Seymour's wedding in 1942; Buddy is not only the narrator—providing yet more information about the Glass family and "It's a Wise Child"—but the protagonist. A twenty-three-year-old serviceman stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, he travels to New York and appears at the Manhattan brownstone where the ceremony is to take place only to discover that Seymour has backed out. Shortly thereafter he finds himself in a car with a number of people from the wedding who are so unfavorably disposed toward Seymour that Buddy finds it more comfortable not to admit to being his brother. As a result he ends up hearing all sorts of unflattering remarks about Seymour—that he's "a latent homosexual and a schizoid personality," that he's "either never *grown up* or is just an absolute raving maniac of some crazy kind," that having been on the radio as a child must have made it impossible for him to "learn to relate to normal people." Buddy ends up taking the people to his apartment, where his sister Boo Boo's been staying; there he comes across Seymour's diary, in which Seymour records his fiancée Muriel's (and Muriel's mother's) fears about his sanity, and his own theories: "Oh, God, if I'm anything by a clinical name, I'm a kind of paranoiac in reverse. I suspect people of plotting to make me happy." He quotes Vedanta: "Marriage partners are to serve each other . . . . How wonderful, how sane, how beautifully difficult, and therefore true. The joy of responsibility for the first time in my life." Eventually—to the ire of Buddy's guests—word comes that Seymour and Muriel have eloped; and it is suddenly clear that the quoted diary passage was meant to make us realize that it would be inappropriate for such a brilliant, self-searching paragon as Seymour to wed Muriel in the company of these vulgarians.

"Seymour—An Introduction" (1959), which was reprinted together with "Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters" in 1963, rehearses yet again the high points of the Glass family saga, and provides us with a few new facts on Seymour. We learn, for instance, that Seymour was five ten-and-a-half and that he loved sports and games; we learn what a magnificent Oriental-type poet he was, one of the "three or four *very* nearly non-expendable poets" America has produced (no samples); and we get pages and pages of description of Seymour's eyes and nose and mouth and skin. The ultimate pur-

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pose of all this is to communicate some notion, in that elliptical Glass manner, of why Seymour "was the only person I've ever habitually consorted with, banged around with, who more frequently than not tallied with the classical conception, as I saw it, of a *mukta,* a ringding enlightened man, a God-knower." (That's Buddy talking.) The piece does not take the form of a short story because "his character lends itself to no legitimate sort of narrative compactness that *I* know of." And so what Salinger/Buddy gives us instead is an extremely eccentric series of wordy, highly self-conscious periodic sentences and transitional-sounding paragraphs—which, though they run on and on for nearly a hundred and fifty pages, manage to say very, very little about Seymour, or, for that matter, about anything else. (One of the more peculiar things about this story is that Buddy intimates that *he* wrote "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," and tells us the story was not "true," but was rather an imaginative reconstruction of the events of Seymour's last day based upon the available facts.)

Salinger's last published work, "Hapworth 16, 1924" (1965), is even more bizarre—indeed, virtually unreadable. It takes the form of a letter that Seymour writes home from summer camp at age seven; but no seven-year-old in the history of the world ever wrote anything remotely like this. The letter is thoughtful, introspective, and twenty thousand words long, its ornate vocabulary and elaborate rolling sentences suggestive (despite occasional awkwardnesses) of William F. Buckley at his most Buckleyesque. A large portion of the letter is devoted to Seymour's summer reading list, which consists of dozens of high-toned and esoteric (and both Western and Eastern) volumes of literature, theology, history, science, and philosophy—far more books than twenty literate adults would be likely to read in one summer. Is this Salinger's ideal child? (One recalls a line from a letter—quoted by Hamilton—that Salinger wrote his friend, Judge Learned Hand, upon the birth in 1956 of Salinger's daughter: by summer, he boasts, the baby will be able to explain some of the more obscure aspects of Vedanta to both of them.) Or is the story a wish-fulfillment fantasy—a chance for J. D. Salinger to be seven years old again, with nearly all the wit and articulateness of his grown-up self?

Throughout all of these Glass family tales, the consistent presence—whether as a living person or as an honored ghost—is that of Seymour, the child-man (and, finally, in "Hapworth," the man-child); he hovers over the stories the way that giant fetus hovers in the heavens near the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey,* the inescapable personification of all the qualities that Salinger held, and perhaps still holds, most dear. This obsessive deification of Seymour could never have happened, of course, had Salinger not been, to put it plainly, a child at heart—a writer who had difficulty establishing a memorable conflict that did not involve a childlike sensibility coming up against the "real world," who rarely, if ever, created a compelling character that did not end up with a nervous breakdown as a result of such a conflict, and whose imagination seems to have been constitutionally incapable of taking such a character past the breakdown and into a stable adult life, or some reasonable approximation thereof.

Like many other Beat and hippie-era American children in search of pure and sweet and simple keys to the cosmos, Salinger was, it is clear, drawn all too easily into the black hole of Oriental mysticism, where Western systems of aesthetic valuation have no place and where a Seymour Glass—child prodigy, Oriental poet, spiritual *Übermensch,* and tragiheroic suicide—could evolve posthaste into an all but godlike symbol, the typical Salinger protagonist taken to its illogical extreme. So fascinated did Salinger become with the idea of Seymour that he lost all interest in plot, pace, characterization, conflict, and other such irrelevancies; far from being recognizable works of contemporary American fiction directed at a literary audience, his last two published prose pieces are, rather, letters to himself—gospels, as it were, about the Glass family,

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that private pantheon of eternally puerile Olympians.

To be sure, generations of celebrated American writers have been nearly as devoted as Salinger to the theme of innocence and experience, to the exploration of characters who are extraordinarily pure in soul or who refuse to accept adulthood or whose characteristically American guilelessness is contrasted tellingly and tragically with the sophistication and corruption of Europe. One thinks—to select only a few representative names—of Melville's Billy Budd, Twain's Huckleberry Finn, James's Daisy Miller. (The writer as a child of sorts has also, in this century at least, become a peculiar American institution: one thinks of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Mailer.) Leslie Fiedler wrote an entire book, *Love and Death in the American Novel,* demonstrating that the protagonists of American fiction since the time of Cooper had, to an extent unprecedented in Western literature, been notable for their aversion to adult relationships and responsibilities. But the writers—at least the greatest writers—of the works in question did not themselves *endorse* their characters' childish aversions; they did not see those characters' immature behavior as marks of superiority.

And that is where J. D. Salinger is different. For, despite its many virtues, its frequent charm and felicity of style, the bulk of Salinger's fiction is seriously weakened by the fact that he is congenitally less interested in getting to the bottom of his characters' emotionally retarded behavior than he is in celebrating it; less interested in creating a credible fictional universe than in sequestering himself within a private, privileged nursery with his child-heroes and childish heroes, a place from which he can look down upon those numberless masses who are not only less sensitive and intelligent, but less beautiful, sophisticated, and wealthy, than his protagonists. (And who, incidentally, unlike most of his central characters, neither have a connection to show business nor look down upon it as fervently as Salinger thinks they should.) For all his supposed spiritual enlightenment, then, Salinger manifestly remained, throughout his public writing career, as snobbish as he had been at military school and college. It is dismaying, but should not be surprising, that so contemptuous a man, however considerable his talent, was unable to produce a more consequential body of work than that which he has bequeathed us. Nor, alas—given the current literary climate, in which cultish devotions and sentimental attachments often count as strongly as sensible critical evaluation in the making of a literary reputation—is it surprising that the immense esteem in which Salinger is held by literate Americans should continue to stand in such remarkable disproportion to the actual level of his literary achievement.

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"Water music"
by John Frederick Nims

Ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ

"Nothing noble as water, no,
and there's gold with its glamor . . ."
Pindar on trumpet—First
feisty Olympian Ode to the horseman,
Daring us, across the years:
Look to excellence only.
Water, you're pure wonder! here's
February, and on the pane your
frost in grisaille shows how you flowered
all last summer; it
Stencils clover, witchgrass, mullein
meadow; between boskage gleam
Shores of Lake Michigan, her snow pagoda, junks of ice.
Farther off, spray and breaker, and your clouds
That hush color to a shadow as they pass,
While snowflakes—just a few—go moseying

Around . . . over . . . That cloud-coulisse
valentine of a window!
Back of its ferny scrim
scene after scene of a gala performance!
"Water's Metamorphosis,"
That's the show, and in lights too,
Booking all the world for stage.
Now let's make believe there's a magic
camera, sensitive only to
water molecules,

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Loading film that blueprints hidden
  wetness in things—profile bold
But pearly the pulp of it: highrise, traffic, elm, marquee
Like electronic pointilliste machines;
On sidewalks, prismatic people, prismy dogs;
Ice-palaces for home. They effervesce

    Of course. Water's alive with light.
      Spawned of the ocean, life's macromolecules
    Begot history and time;
      culture their afterthought. Our own
    Body: mainly bog. Like
      trees walking? No. Walking waves
    Are what *we* are. Flesh briny. Our bone-shack sways
      to, smells of, the sea-wrack.
    If we're stormy, halcyon too,
      no surprise, with such
    Surf, doldrum, and seiche in us.
      Alcoholic? Some.
    Water-freaks? Every last one. (All but death,
    Old bonehead who, teetotaling, totals all.)
      Thanks to wet ways, we live here.

You've seen films of the Hindenburg?
  Sky afire and the human
Rain from the clouds? But that's
  hydrogen's way: a psychotic companion
Turning—in a flash—berserk.
As for oxygen: sulphur's
Cousin, arsonist, a false
Friend to metal, apt to explode our
  sleepy haze of sawdust or wheat.
  Sickrooms venture its
Name in whispers. Breathe it straight a
  while, and your throat burns, your head's
Logy, disoriented—you're a weakfish gulping sky.
(Nitrogen-thinned, it's breathable.) We've two
Irate djinns here—and what kabbalahs compel
Their spirits to that peace in H_2O?

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Strange, that water's a blend of fire
  when it's flame that she hates and
Hisses, her molecules
  angled like arrowheads tooled for a crossbow,
Blunt, just 104 degrees.
Agincourts in the faucet?
Why not? Hi-tech myths can ape
Many an apeman superstition.
  Yet if not twined lovingly—these
  two explosives—my
Wineglass here could turn *grenade.* As
  water reminds us, the world's
A maelstrom of lava beneath her easy circumstance.
All matter's smouldering at the core. Old-
Time Jehovahs—brimstone and the flood on tap—
Might better have let hydrogen relax

    Its double bond to oxygen—
      which would have shown the folk, given folk to show
    Just who *was* Who, as most
      things evanesced to zero space
    —Most, including people.
      Water's our friend. Faucet-flow
    Around finger endears, the way kittens do.
      It blandishes bourbon
    As it mellows (fluid and cube)
      fire to amber, with
    Glass melodies. Diamond, ice
      crystallize alike
    (To the eye); ice though is good-humored, and
    Come spring, will restore playhouse and beach to us,
      melt to mellifluous tilth.

Besides, diamond's a liar—*poof*
  and it's soot when the heat's on.
Calling their glaciers back,
  Ice Ages warmed to us, left the lea greener.
What would Diamond Ages do?
Shrink-wrap countries in rock-glass,
Leave the planet strangled, sky's

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Lavaliere, a Tiffany bijou
  glinting frigid fire. And would you,
  Diamond-Age young girls,
Cherish dewdrops, think them jewels to
  pretty your hair with—eyes brave
Through the damp of your lash before the livid avalanche?
Let's be glad—most of us anyway—we're
More dew-sort than diamond-kind. And there's the myth:
What suckled Aphrodite, sea or stone?
Festooned Sicily shore?—where foam,
  all glissando and swell, wreathes
Buoyant the swimmer. Dream:
  eastward in Eden once sparkled a garden
More delicious even than
Sappho's: apples blew perfume
Through liana languors; brooks
Wove their watery spell; mid-grove a
  Presence walked in cool of the day.
  No one dewier
Than that human pair, pellucid
  two, in the sun-flickered shade
By the pools, on a ferny tussock banked like pouffes. No one
Dewier? *You* were! that rickety pier
Once! your shoulders bubbling moonlight as you swam
And then—spirit of water, lithe—gleamed bare

As moon on the pier, hair swirled back,
  laughing at me, "Last one in . . . !" Prismatic girl
(Like those glorified trans-
  lunar dancers that Dante saw)
Sprinkling me with chill lake's
  mischievous fire. Now the tears
Are like fire to think . . . think . . . what I've thought and thought.
  But safer to think small:
Summer thunder, hail on the lawn;
  cuddling scotch-and-hail,
We blessed it as "heaven-sent!"
  Mostly water is.
Pray that it keep us. Our blue globe in space.
Our grand loves. Our least ones—like this spindly rose
  rambling on Pindar's lattice.

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Art

The School of Paris revisited

by Jed Perl

The Chapel of the Rosary, which Matisse designed in the late 1940s, is on an unprepossessing street in the town of Vence in the hills above Nice. One's first view of the building is of something tucked away; from the entrance at street level one walks down a flight of stairs to reach the Chapel, and all that's visible from the street is a few walls, two small ceramic mosaics, a bit of the Chapel's blue-and-white tile roof, and its wrought-iron cross. Matisse's building works with the scene at a distinct but not irreverent angle: the blue-and-white, zigzag pattern roof makes a modest dissent from the inevitable red roofs of Provence, and the cross gains authority from the luminous vistas beyond. As with the rest of the buildings in this neighborhood of comfortable suburban villas, what creates an impression here isn't architecture but the way the architecture fits into a landscape full of spectacular plunging vistas.

The woman who opens the door of the Chapel and acts as a kind of informal guide emphasizes Matisse's desire to make a Provençal chapel; and one feels this ambition in the flat simplicity of the space and the slightly luminescent glow of the tile that covers most of three walls. What also strikes the visitor is the extent to which Matisse has avoided much of the obvious side of Provençal style: Matisse has no use for the red-tile floors, rough plaster and stone walls that give such a distinctly Provençal flavor to the building for the nearby Maeght Foundation, which was designed by the Spanish architect José Luis Sert in 1959. The architecture of the Chapel, over which Matisse had total control, is startling and troubling in its plainness. With its flat plaster walls and unlovely corners and details the Chapel looks as much like an example of standard prefab modern interior design as its photographs lead one to expect. Matisse hasn't created a beautiful piece of architecture, but in his unwillingness to enter into the conventions of Provençal style (the conventions out of which Sert makes such a lovely building) lies the key to what Matisse is doing here. If you've never been to Vence, the whole Chapel exploit can seem a bit unpleasant, like an artist's attempt to play God. But the Chapel isn't overbearing; it doesn't leave you feeling manipulated. That dull, architectural framework may have been Matisse's way of telling us he wasn't going to play any tricks. In the windows and murals the fat of religious art has been cut away. Matisse is obviously trying to find a way to be truthful both to his own skeptical artist's spirit and to the implications of the religious imagery that he has taken on—a Madonna and Child, a Stations of the Cross. The discrete elements in the Chapel of the Rosary may not exactly come together, but Matisse's clarity of purpose carries all before it. The Chapel is one of those works of art that leave us emptied out; it has the direct, elemental force of the Romanesque.

The ride up the steep, luxuriant, green

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hills from Cagnes-sur-Mer; lunch in the largish, plain square of Vence, with its shade trees and bus depots: these are part of the experience of the Chapel—just as, a few miles to the south, the ride up a drier, scrappier, sun-scorched landscape is part of the experience of Picasso's War and Peace murals in Vallauris. For the visitor looking at art, the towns of the Côte d'Azur, with their resort-area informality, are the retirement land of the School of Paris. Here's Nice, where Matisse lived for decades: blocks upon blocks of turn-of-the-century hotels, with their odd combination of stolidity and whimsy. Here are the hills above the coast, full of the variegated, seductive foliage that Bonnard painted at Le Cannet; and here are the beaches Picasso sat on in the 1940s and 1950s.

Part of what engages a visitor to the South is the artists' evident struggles to come to terms with the place. In 1946, when Picasso visited Antibes, the mayor cleverly gave him as a studio the Grimaldi Castle—a big stone structure with a twelfth-century tower on a cliff overlooking the sea—and Picasso returned the favor by leaving to the city everything he did there—thus the Picasso Museum. A few small, greenish-gray still lifes of anemones and octopi are in the Museum, and these are lovely. But the general effect is terribly thin. You feel here Picasso trying to plunge into the ancient origins of the town—into its near-mythic history as a Greek port named Antipolis. One of the big paintings is called *Joy of Life, or Antipolis,* and this is full of the mythological creatures—dancers, pipers, fauns—with whom Picasso, in his imagination, must have wanted to populate the Mediterranean beaches and woods. When you're in the Grimaldi Castle you know what Picasso was up to. You understand that he came to the shores of the Mediterranean and wanted to bring the spirits of the ancient port to life; but it's a séance that doesn't occur. The huge monochrome triptych *Satyr, Faun and Centaur with a Trident* reveals Picasso working toward a minimalist decor somewhat reminiscent of Matisse's work five years later in the Chapel; but Picasso's line here is approximate, rather vague, really. He's just covering ground. Picasso always knows what to do with a corner, how to fill the space. The museum is full of neatly put together, rather blah paintings. At the Grimaldi Castle, Picasso's combination of intellectual brilliance and workaholic enthusiasm goes nowhere: what Picasso did here is completely swamped by the spectacular views of the Mediterranean one sees from the Castle terrace. One gets the impression Picasso spent most of his time at the beach—at least one hopes he did.

Picasso at Vallauris: now this one would expect to be the nadir. Here was the Maestro, in the little dying ceramic town that he won over with his energy, his ingenuity, his spirit. The Maestro's *Man with Sheep* is there in the little square (a gift to the town), and arriving on market day, one sees a crate of Spanish garlic sitting casually at the statue's feet. All the olives and the tomatoes and the breads of market day, and then the Picasso: one can't help feeling that this has about it the air of a scenario too carefully contrived. Picasso's involvement in the ceramics industry of Vallauris is said to have turned the town's economy around; and the *Man with Sheep* standing in the square seems designed to support a most artificial picture of Picasso as paterfamilias. But the grand old guys of modern art have a way of surprising you and getting down to serious business when you may least expect it—and that's what happens here in Vallauris. In the War and Peace Chapel, which Picasso painted in 1952 and which in reproduction seems the most bombastic of all his works, he breaks through in places, making of an odd combination of Cold War current events and classical associations a dense, haunting mural.

The War and Peace Chapel is very small—just a little vaulted cave—and the paintings, which are curved, fill it, bending across the ceiling and creating one seamless piece. The room isn't more than four yards wide, so we're forced into a tight proximity with the murals; their life-size and over-life-

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size figures seem to occupy *our* space. *Peace,* with its dancing woman, big, goofy horse, child acrobat, and picnickers, is formidable. It's a fast painting—there are splatters and drips of paint—and Picasso's drawing has the twisting, contortionist's energy of the best of his 1930s and 1940s works. The color is deep, full-bodied. *Peace* is an invention, a conceit, but it's a conceit in the major decorative mode of Pompeii and Venice, and it works. *War,* with its shadowy murderers, angular chariot, and big good-guy holding up a dove-decorated shield, is less of a success, though nowhere near the embarrassment it looks to be in reproduction. It's not tacky, like the *Massacre in Korea* (1951). *War* is a potboiler. You get the impression here Picasso didn't know what war was like or didn't know how to tell what he knew; maybe it was that he'd done war before, in *Guernica* and *The Charnel House,* and wasn't much interested. Still, it's a brilliant potboiler. In the Chapel an engaging dialogue develops between *War,* with its broken, ugly, slapped-together forms, and *Peace,* where all is curved and curled and humorous. One is glad for *War* as a complement to the deeper-running, more direct emotions of *Peace.*

Vence and Vallauris are a bit out of the way, and the American traveller, who won't naturally think of the Riviera as a place to go, visits with a consciousness that he or she may not come again. These sites have an aura, and it's good to see modern art outside the ordinary context of the big urban museum. It's a bit like cathedral-hopping, visiting these sites of the School of Paris. The setting gives the art a special resonance. (This pleasure of specific locations extends to places which aren't quite so intimately connected with the artists. For example, the Léger Museum in Biot.) In the 1950s and 1960s the modernist sites of the Côte d'Azur were events, color spreads in *Life* magazine. Now these chapels and museums exist in a hazy middle distance of the imagination; they're a bit obscure. Looking at modern art on the Riviera—as well as the School of Paris art in Paris—you may feel you can't quite bring it into focus. You may also be glad that all the impressions don't cohere. The connections, the sensations aren't frozen.

Paris now has an extraordinary wealth of modern art on display—more, probably, than ever before. There is the newly rearranged National Museum of Modern Art at the Pompidou Center, with its serenely ordered galleries; there's the permanent installation at the Orangerie of the Jean Walter and Paul Guillaume Collection, so rich in the Derain, Matisse, and Picasso of the 1920s; there's the new Picasso Museum; and, less visited, but chockablock with masterpieces, there's the old Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, on rue President Wilson. One has the impression many Parisians would still gladly trade all this in for New York's Museum of Modern Art. But what the French have at least equals the combined forces of the Modern and the Guggenheim in interest, and some of us find their collections more engaging. The French public collections, which are pretty much based on gifts from artists and collectors (and which have been greatly enriched by recent changes in the French inheritance laws), don't have the step-by-step logic, the didactic force of the Museum of Modern Art's holdings. French museums tend to emphasize the coherence of individual artists' careers over the goose-step march of innovations to be found at MOMA and in the modern-art history books.

After you've been in Paris a few days, it's the way individual artists' imaginations seem to cycle back and forth through the ages that becomes overwhelming—awesome. You're in front of Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* in the Louvre and then you're in front of Matisse's *Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Ground* at the Pompidou Center (a painting as great as any Matisse in New York) and it's as if Matisse was living inside that world of Delacroix's, pushing it this way and that. One understands in Paris André Malraux's call for a Museum Without Walls—a call that echoed the desires of the artists. After an American has been to the Louvre, he may

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feel the American museums are shockingly thin; he may just wish we had a decent museum *with walls* back home. It's precisely the omnivorousness of the Louvre, which folds everything back into itself, that pushed the Parisian artists to reach beyond—to the basements and back rooms of the Louvre (Coptic, Romanesque) and to Africa and Asia. After a while, you feel tangled up in all the connections—as if you're going a bit crazy. The Picasso Museum looks like Picasso's posthumous attempt to invent his own, one-man Louvre. It even has, in the fine group of works by other artists that he collected, a built-in past. To see Picasso's Corots, his Le Nains, is tremendously moving. In Paris, the oldest things can look shocking, brand-new; and the newer ones supremely confident, as old as the hills.

There's a giddy happiness that overtakes you in the museums of Paris. You keep getting recharged, you can't keep up with yourself. And it's one of the disappointments of Paris that what's going on in the galleries doesn't seem to feed off this—or feeds off it in abysmally boring ways. Paris still has many of the old-style, poshy galleries, and the Parisians continue to present art and antiques as luxury commodities in ways rather unusual in New York. We have, on Madison Avenue, a sprinkling of establishments where pictures are served up as the ultimate rich man's accoutrement; but something—the dregs of the Puritan spirit or the absence of a Royalist past—has left Americans somewhat immune to the snob appeal of art. Still, snobs can have taste, and one of the most snobbish Parisian galleries—an enormous gift-box of a place called Artcurial—has recently been doing interesting shows: late de Chirico, women of the early avant-garde. This summer the show at Artcurial (it's on the ave Matignon on the Right Bank) was "L'aventure surréaliste autour d'André Breton," a vast, sprawling affair that mixed the very good and the very bad. It was unusual to see Hayter, Masson, and Pollock on the same wall (as far as I'm concerned, Masson won), and there were more Wolfgang Paalens than one had ever seen in one place (or perhaps needed to see). This was all quite diverting, but one left with the unpleasant impression of an interior whose over-rich decor of smoked glass and chrome and expensive stone was designed primarily to bolster the price structure. There can be an oppression to the old-time art biz in Paris, and one wearies of the posters in the shop windows everywhere, advertising exhibits of fifth- and tenth-rate School of Paris paintings. After you've gone to some of the most established Right Bank galleries (even to Galerie Schmit, which had a magnificent show of nineteenth- and twentieth-century masters this summer), you understand what a relief the white SoHo-style spaces of the galleries around the Pompidou Center must be for the French.

Paris doesn't lack precedents for the cleaned-out style of gallery space. The Galerie Louise Leiris, on the rue de Monceau, where Picasso showed and Masson still exhibits, favors an understated style and minimal framing that let the work show to best effect. And Maeght's various galleries are clean and spare. But the spaces around the Pompidou Center (and some on the Left Bank as well) don't evoke the pure-spirited, gently anti-bourgeois ambience of the heroic days of the School of Paris—they point across the Atlantic, and even, when they're small, straight to the East Village. I saw the May and June shows at a few dozen galleries, and I didn't see anything I'd be tempted to review if I saw it in New York. In and of itself, this isn't a judgment against the Parisian scene: one can go to thirty galleries in New York and see nothing of interest, and the visitor inevitably hits the mainstream galleries, which may not be the best. What the visitor can judge, though, and judge in relation to the home scene, is something about ambience and style. Many of the Parisian galleries are located in the courtyards of large apartment buildings, and there's a charm to these hidden-away spaces. Many of them also have skylights, thus good natural light—a luxury unheard of in New York. But the emotions one experiences in these

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galleries are one's ordinary New York gallery-going emotions. The range of the shows is what one knows from New York: there's a funky style, and a tasteful style, and, as with us, there are galleries that seem to favor certain color schemes—black and white, for instance. If there's good contemporary art being done in Paris, I imagine it's every bit as much of a paradox as it is here in New York. One experiences in Paris—as, no doubt, one would in Germany—the so-called internationalizing of contemporary art. What this amounts to is a lack of surprise. Perhaps the art jet set doesn't want the excitement of seeing something in one city it hasn't already seen in another city. This is frozen-food modernism: you can get the same brands shipped anywhere.

I was in Paris between the closing of the Pompidou Center's big spring Viennese show and the opening of the big summer show, "Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne?" What seemed to be drawing the art crowds in late May and June and receiving a good deal of coverage in the art magazines was an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris called "1960, Les nouveaux-réalistes." This focused on what is roughly the European version of Pop. A Jean Tinguely clattered away, looking pleasantly disheveled, as his sculptures will, and one felt sorry for the Europeans, who can't do this kind of thing with the American briskness. The work is pretty, quaint, picturesque in ways Pop isn't meant to be. These collages of ripped-up film posters and heaps of interesting-looking garbage combine Surrealist silliness and Abstract Expressionist informality in a diffuse, interior-decoratorish way. In the 1960s there was around the work of Tinguely, Arman, César, Christo, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Jacques Villeglé, and the others a good deal of hullabaloo about seeing the world as it is. And now this is overlaid with a dose of Sixties nostalgia—but the work is all out to lunch. Mine was a duty visit.

The other major museum show, which formed a kind of prelude to "Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne?", was "La sculpture française au XIX^{e} siècle" at the Grand Palais. This show contained many interesting things, but was basically a big tiresome bore. It went on forever, and brought news that hasn't been fresh for a decade or two. Does anyone need to hear again that the academic sculptors could be pretty good in their sketches and studies? Or that there are thematic connections between avant-garde and academic art? The French had better be very careful about reviving all that nineteenth-century academic trash. They've got enough of it salted away in their provincial museums to swamp every good painting in Paris.

More of an oddball event, and more enjoyable for it, was "Roland Barthes: Le texte et l'image," at the Pavillon des Arts of Les Halles. I don't have much patience for art shows with long wall labels, but this event, which had the longest wall labels of all time, was so unabashedly about the visual arts as seen through a literary intelligence that it seemed churlish to resist. Barthes's writings on art are an irregular, erratic lot, and the show, which included excerpts from the essays (these were the wall labels) and examples of the work he was referring to, had an eccentric, breezy tone. What caught one up in "Le texte et l'image" was the almost surreal commingling of art of wildly different characters and qualities. There were some lovely seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings; a beautiful quartet of the seasons by Arcimboldo; an Artemisia Gentileschi; plates from Diderot's *Encyclopédie*; works by André Masson, Henri Michaux, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein; photographs by Baron Von Gloeden and Richard Avedon; advertisements; and Barthes's own very weak drawings, which are a cross between Masson, Michaux, and Klee.

Barthes's essays on the visual arts are the work of a very intelligent man who doesn't have much natural feeling for the subject. He doesn't see the work of art as a whole (which is why he can't write convincingly about major art); but he can dissect the work of a minor or eccentric artist in such a

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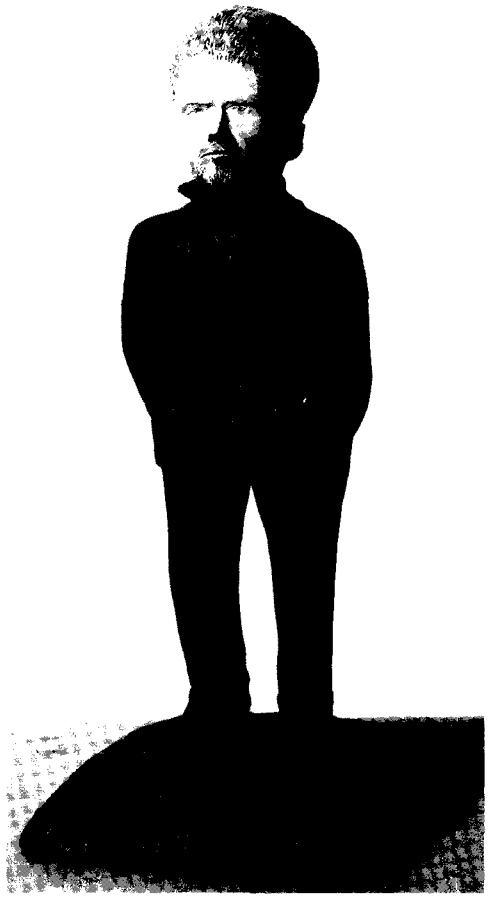
way as to bring into high relief all the artist's most endearing and characteristic mannerisms. One can't say that Barthes had any particular visual taste—he could weave his web around all kinds of things. And if you compare his art essays with those of an earlier French writer, such as Valéry, you realize Barthes had less that was substantial to weave his web about. There's a big controversy blowing around Barthes these days, as to how he should be regarded. In *art press,* the liveliest of the French art magazines (it covers a bit of music, movies, and literature, as well as the visual arts), Philippe Roger, the author of a new book, *Roland Barthes, roman,* has attacked what he calls the Susan Sontag view of Barthes, as a kind of dandy. The American literary crowd seems to be all for Barthes as a dandy or an intimist (another of Roger's expressions) these days; but the art-history set is hanging on to Barthes as a theorist. At "Le texte et l'image" one thought of the good Barthes essays—on the plates of the *Encyclopédie,* on photography—and they felt like great pièces d'occasions. The theory Barthes plays around with fits the occasion, which is no mean feat. The mistake the art historians make is to start extending the theory—they leave it exposed, ridiculous looking.

Marcelin Pleynet, the French critic whose study of Matisse has been in the New York bookstores for about a year, has just published in France a book called *Les Etats-Unis de la peinture.* It's a collection of essays written during the past couple of decades, and it pretty much keeps to the high road—Pollock, Johns, Rauschenberg. When asked by an interviewer about the difference between French and American art after World War II, Pleynet explained that there was a pessimism to French art—the Americans were more optimistic. This is the conventional view on both sides of the Atlantic, but there is also to French postwar art an optimism that's not enough acknowledged. When I visited Jean Hélion, the eighty-two-year-old French painter, I asked him why Balthus and Giacometti and he had all been

Michael de Lisio

Sculpture

Portraits of Artists and Writers



Ezra Pound, 1972.
Polychromed bronze, 10½ × 4½ × 4½ inches. Edition of 5.

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drawn after the War to the subject of the street. He said it had to do with the desire, after a time of war and privation, to affirm the simple things in life. The dark tones of postwar Giacometti and Balthus and Hélion sometimes cause us to forget how much their work is about the pure pleasure of being back on the street again.

The beauty of the simplest acts—the drinking of a cup of coffee in the café, the carrying home of a loaf of bread—still strike with a force in Paris. It's a part of what draws people to Paris—this sense the French have of how these things ought to be done. In the big triptychs Hélion painted in the 1960s and 1970s, which have never been shown in America, we see the artist pushing through to a casually noble sense of the street. (I saw these paintings, which have been featured in museum shows in Europe over the past few years, in Hélion's warehouse.) The large Hélions, which can be fifteen or twenty feet long, are an odd combination of informality and monumentality. His descriptions of bodies are swift and generalizing, with arms and legs and parts of the face given in fast curves of the brush. In the late 1960s, in the *Triptyque du Dragon* and *Choses vues en mai, 1968* he's looking for an art as heroic as the nineteenth-century paintings in the Louvre. The most recent of the triptychs, from the end of the Seventies, is called *Le jugement dernier des choses,* and takes its inspiration from the flea market—a great French subject. A big cast of characters is rummaging among the junk of the flea market, and you feel here the pile-up of the ages—you see civilization in dishabille. One woman is trying on pairs of shoes, a man is inspecting candlesticks, another is holding two parts of a broken record. The figures and objects are painted against a gray and orange ground, in quick sharp curves and angles, accented here and there with splats of high-keyed candy-green and yellow and blue and red. The color is abstract, a bit irrational. It's a fascinating, frantic vision, and for anyone who likes to poke around in the little flea markets that sometimes hang onto the ends of the weekday markets in French towns, or to go out to the big flea market at the Porte de Vanves on weekends, *Le jugement dernier des choses* touches a natural, everyday experience. In the central panel the story gets surreal: one shop window dummy is making love to another one. All the way to the right there's a winding staircase, leading we know not where.

To the visitor the beauty of Paris—of the streets and gardens, and of the odd, complex roofscapes (to which Hélion devoted a series of paintings in the 1950s)—feels more than a bit incredible at times. So much preserved, so many views that compose. Sitting on some of the smaller streets on the Left Bank, the city becomes a stage, as artful as Watteau's *Shopsign,* and as multifarious. You can still today visit the spot where Balthus found the setting for his *Passage du Commerce-Saint-André,* and despite the general zooiness of the neighborhood (it's like the West Village on Saturday night), at dusk the little street takes on the twilight color of the Balthus, and figures walking by acquire the peculiar weight of Balthus's old woman and baguette-carrying artist. At the Pompidou Center, in a superb theatrical piece of installation, Giacometti's great *Figure Between Two Houses* is placed in front of a window, so that we see, through the sculpture's open spaces, a vista of Parisian sky. It's a juxtaposition that catches you up even when you're ready for it. What a sense of delight there is in Giacometti, especially in that great book, *Paris sans fin,* which he finished just before his death. At the Pompidou Center a series of pages from *Paris sans fin* are on display, and one grasps the whole unfolding drama of the city. Giacometti gets it all: the layering of experience; the odd, tangential views; the sense of the intermingling of individual and communal lives. In some of the views out of a café window, where we see the lettering on the windows in reverse and the cars parked outside, we're taken into the mystery of the city in ways no artist has ever taken us before.

After Paris, the return to New York is quite a shock. At night, heading uptown in a cab,

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one notes the syncopation of the red-and-green traffic lights, and the great number of neon signs, lights in the dark. All very different from Paris. One understands how Léger and Mondrian felt in New York, how the artificiality of the place, its hyped-up rhythms must have pleased them. The next morning I walk out onto the old, familiar upper-Broadway, as bright and hideous as ever. This cityscape is a permanent wreck.

"For myself," the dance critic and poet Edwin Denby said in the essay "Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets," "I think the walk of New Yorkers is amazingly beautiful, so large and clear." Well, there is something distinctive here; certainly you don't get the feeling of space Denby describes among Europeans, who "have an extraordinary sense of the space they really occupy and of filling that space harmoniously as they rest or move; Americans occupy a much larger space than their actual bodies do." The urgency and restlessness of New York is both a discouragement and an inspiration. There's a violence to our streets, and it's not just the violence of bang-bang in the ghettos. Nothing sits easily here; the scene keeps refusing to compose. The city is a giant heap of experience—unsorted, probably never to be sorted. New York is the least historical, the most modern of all great towns. In this may rest our opportunity; though it's an opportunity that's been traded on too easily, for far too long.

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Music

The pupils of Clara Schumann and the uses of tradition

by Samuel Lipman

The recent publication in England and simultaneous importation into this country of a nine-LP set on the Pearl label of recordings made by three pupils of Clara Schumann (1819-1896) will doubtless excite interest among students and admirers of piano-playing.[1] It is not difficult to see why this should be so: Clara Schumann, of course, was the widow of the great Robert (1810-1856), and a close friend over many years of Johannes Brahms; furthermore, she was by all accounts one of the great musicianly pianists of the second half of the nineteenth century. Because she was a renowned teacher, and because she gave lessons until her death in the mid-1890s, she taught several pianists who played professionally during the subsequent era of sound recording, and two of her pupils lived long enough to make private recordings at a time when tape recording made the capture of extended performances in lifelike sound possible.

It cannot be said that Clara Schumann's pupils included any names likely to be familiar today, either through the memory of live performances or through phonograph records. According to the most extensive list of her pupils I have seen—that contained in Wilson Lyle's recent and only partially satisfactory *A Dictionary of Pianists* (Schirmer Books, 1985)—the best-known ones included Richard Andersson, Leonard Borwick, Fanny Davies, Henry Eames, Ilona Eibenschütz, Adolf Frey, Carl Friedberg, Amina Goodwin, Clement Harris, Natalia Janotha, Louise Japha, Walter Lampe, Carolus Oberstadt, Edward Perry, Oscar da Silva, Anton Strelezky, Franklin Taylor, Lazzaro Uzielli, Mathilde Verne, and Marie Wurm. Of these, only Borwick, Davies, Eibenschütz, Friedberg, and Janotha are now remembered at all. But Borwick seems not to have recorded, and no evidence actually exists that Friedberg (well known to have associated with Brahms) actually studied with Clara Schumann. Janotha made four recordings in 1905 for the Gramophone and Typewriter Co., Ltd. (the precursor of His Master's Voice, which in 1931 was absorbed into EMI, the great English recording conglomerate). The most Harold C. Schonberg, perhaps our leading connoisseur of old pianists, can say of Natalia Janotha in his standard *The Great Pianists* (1963) is: "On the basis of her records, she was anything but a sensitive pianist, and certainly not a good musician, but at least she could get around the keyboard." That leaves Davies and Eibenschütz, though to this pair must be added, as we shall see, the name (unaccountably omitted by Lyle in his list of Schumann pupils) of yet another woman, Adelina de Lara.

It is these three pianists—Fanny Davies (1861-1934), Ilona Eibenschütz (1873-1967), and Adelina de Lara (1872-1961)—who make up the massive new Pearl set. The

1 Pearl CLA 1000, distributed by Qualiton Imports (3928 Crescent St., Long Island City, NY 11101).

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earliest recordings here, of short pieces by Brahms and Scarlatti, were made by Eibenschütz for G&T in 1903, though they were (according to Lyle) never issued in her lifetime; they are supplemented by noncommercial recordings of short pieces by Schumann and Brahms and excerpts from longer works by Beethoven and Schumann, along with a broadcast interview containing her reminiscences of Brahms, all dating from the early 1950s.

The representation of Fanny Davies on these new discs is rather more substantial. It consists of commercially released recordings, made for English Columbia in 1928, 1929, and 1930, of three major Robert Schumann works: the Concerto, the *Kinderszenen* and the *Davidsbündlertänze.*

By far the largest part of the Pearl set is devoted to the playing of Adelina de Lara, in performances taped in 1951 and 1952. Indeed, so copious is the de Lara representation that it amounts to a conspectus of Robert Schumann's major works for the piano. Included here are the *Davidsbündlertänze,* the *Carnaval,* the *Fantasiestücke* opus 12, the *Etudes symphoniques,* the *Fantasie,* the *Kreisleriana,* the *Kinderszenen,* the *Faschingsschwank aus Wien,* the sonatas in F-sharp minor and G minor, and even (with the pianist Albert Ferber) the *Andante and variations* for two pianos. There are also many smaller Schumann pieces here, including *Der Vogel als Prophet* and the famous *Arabeske.* As if all this weren't enough, these LPs also contain de Lara performances of the Beethoven 32 Variations in C minor, several short Brahms pieces, and (again with Albert Ferber) Brahms's *Variations on a Theme of Haydn,* op. 56B, in the composer's own scoring for two pianos.

A mere description of the historical world out of which these nine LPs come goes far to suggest why they are being received as a privileged glimpse into a fantasy storehouse of nineteenth-century musical riches. As every music lover knows, despite the growth over the past decades of interest in preromantic music, the hearts of the audience —and especially the hearts of any large audience—remain in happy thrall to the masterworks written from Beethoven to Brahms and Tchaikowsky.

Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the piano, which was born in something like its present form during Beethoven's lifetime, and which achieved its mature form by the 1890s, or perhaps a decade earlier. The great works for the piano *qua* piano are not those of Bach, who wrote for the radically different harpsichord, or even those of Mozart, who clearly did not write for an instrument of the brilliance, volume, and tonal character of the modern piano. The great works begin rather with the Beethoven Sonata in C minor, opus 13 (1798-99), known best not by its key or by its opus number but by the very romantic name (assigned by Beethoven) of "*pathétique.*" They go on perhaps as far as the famous Tchaikowsky Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor (1874-75) and the last works of Brahms, which date from the early and mid-1890s. What was written later for the piano—including the works of Rachmaninoff, Debussy, and Ravel, to mention the three most consequential twentieth-century writers of idiomatic piano music—seems supplementary to the great tradition rather than central to it, no matter how popular such music is with performers and audiences.

This great tradition, then, spans the nineteenth century. It includes the piano solo music of Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Brahms—and, not least, Robert Schumann. Not so triumphantly profound as Beethoven, not so melodically charming as Schubert, not so elegantly yearning as Chopin, not so diabolically brilliant as Liszt, and not so solidly complex as Brahms, Schumann nonetheless found his own voice. It was his gift to combine the fantastic imagery associated with such romantic literary figures as E. T. A. Hoffmann with a melodic and harmonic instinct solidly rooted in German folk music; he brought this combination to bear upon the piano at a time when that instrument was increasingly to be found in middle-class homes.

Schumann does not seem to have been a

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first-class pianist himself. In an age of virtuoso pianists like Chopin and Liszt, this might well have been an obstacle to the acceptance of his music. But whatever failings he may have had as an executant were more than made up for by his wife's prowess. Her great reputation as a pianist went back to her earliest years as a child prodigy; by the time she reached adulthood, she was one of the leading pianists of Europe, admired above all for her musicality and for the quality of thought she brought to the music she essayed. During Schumann's lifetime she was the leading exponent of his music; after his death, with the help of her great friend Brahms, she became the keeper of the flame, not just as a performer but also as the editor of the collected edition of Schumann's piano works and as an immensely respected teacher.

Given all this prehistory, it is hardly surprising that the new Pearl set has been rapturously received, at least in some quarters. Alan Sanders, writing in the July 1986 issue of the English record magazine *Gramophone,* can scarcely contain his enthusiasm:

> . . . not only have some of these performances been retrieved from storage, cleaned, and put back on view in new frames, they have been rescued from irretrievable deterioration with the same care and devotion which picture restorers will bring to a fine work of art . . . .
>
> Eibenschütz's only commercial recordings, made in 1903, convey a vivid impression of a brilliant artist who enjoyed a formidable reputation on the concert platform before her marriage and consequent retirement . . . .
>
> Schumann's Piano Concerto is given a wonderfully vital and expressive performance by Fanny Davies of a kind which you will just not hear in modern performances, faithful to the spirit and letter of the score and full of revelatory detail . . . . The second movement is played simply and directly; it is the conversation between soloist and orchestra Clara Schumann said it should be . . . . [T]he third movement is equally telling, played as directed by Clara Schumann . . . .
>
> . . . we must be eternally thankful to Michael Thomas that he persuaded de Lara to play for the microphone, for her performances provide a great insight into the Clara Schumann tradition.
>
> . . . the more I hear them the less the mistakes matter and the more I am aware of de Lara's strength and poetry, her love for the music and her veneration of the tradition through Clara . . . . Adelina de Lara preserved a nineteenth century style of playing into the second half of the twentieth century; it is an astonishing fact that most of the Schumann works she plays here had been taught her by the woman who influenced their composition over a century earlier. Her remarkable Brahms performances are equally authentic: the *Scherzo,* Op. 4 she even learned from the composer himself when he visited Clara Schumann.

All this, it seems to me, raises two questions. The first is whether we ought to play Robert Schumann the way Clara Schumann did, or at least the way she said we ought to—a question to which I shall return. The second seems (at least to me) rather easier to answer: it is, quite simply, what grounds we have for taking the evidence of these records as indicative of what Clara Schumann thought about and wanted in the interpretation of her dead husband's music. It is plain that we cannot now hear Clara Schumann play, though we can hear her pupils; it is equally clear that we have no way of knowing how either their shortcomings or virtues stem from her.

However important and even magical the background of these LPs may be, any evaluation of them cannot depend on a sentimental view of a conjectured past; it must be based rather upon a hard-headed analysis of the piano-playing they contain. And when the records are carefully and dispassionately listened to, it must be said that they contain not riches, but rather something humdrum and on occasion unrefined, insensitive, and even grossly in error.

It would be wrong for me to give the impression that the playing of these three pianists is the same. It is not, and the differ-

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ences between them as piano performers and musical minds are immediately apparent. Eibenschütz is in many ways the most beguiling of the trio. Reasonably fleet-fingered, she plays the A-flat waltz from the Brahms set on the 1903 G&T recording in a lightly attractive way, not perfectly but still with flair. Her Scarlatti on a disc of the same year is fast and sloppy, performed with a devil-may-care approach which barely manages to stay this side of triviality. Her performance, *circa* 1950, of the theme and first variation from the final movement of the Beethoven Sonata in E major, opus 109, is astonishingly fast, and borders on the hard-boiled. The same, too, must be said for the Eibenschütz performance of the "Chopin" movement from the Schumann *Carnaval,* again circa 1950.

The three pieces recorded commercially by Fanny Davies around 1930 are altogether more competent; they date, after all, from a time when electrical recording had vastly improved upon the original acoustic process used for the Eibenschütz G&Ts. There aren't many wrong notes here. Unfortunately, on the evidence of these recordings Davies seems to have been a cautious and even plodding pianist. Her playing of the beautiful melodic statement at the opening of the first movement of the Concerto, for example, in its ubiquitous, unvaried rolling of chords, comes across as a caricature of an empty, old-fashioned style; similarly, Davies's labored execution of the *Passionato* section is a revelation of how fifty years ago and more it was sometimes possible to make a solo career on the piano without being able to negotiate technical passages of moderate difficulty. And beyond these specific problems, everything in these Davies performances, whether inspired by the immortal Clara Schumann or not, is just dull, dull, dull.

And so we come to the major part of this set: the de Lara performances. There is, I suppose, romance aplenty in this story of an aging woman pianist whose stage career had been capsized by personal vicissitudes stretching over the first half of the century. This saga of performing art belatedly recognized is not unparalleled in recent musical history; there is an echo of the de Lara story in the widely publicized mid-1970s case of Ervin Nyiregyházi, the erstwhile Hungarian child prodigy who briefly rocketed, at the age of seventy, to the attention of piano *aficionados* in performances of virtuoso music first taped by an amateur at a San Francisco church concert and then commercially recorded by CBS.

In the case of de Lara, at the beginning of the 1950s a young piano enthusiast named Michael Thomas heard a set of recently made 78 RPM recordings issued by her grandson. These records featured the Schumann *Carnaval,* and other pieces as well, and inspired Thomas with the desire to record, at his own expense if necessary, the playing of this last surviving Clara Schumann pupil still giving concerts. He managed to make these recordings on tape in a room at the London Musical Club in March of 1951, at London's Wigmore Hall in a public concert in the fall of 1951, and again at the London Musical Club in the summer of 1952. The tapes were subsequently issued on LPs in small editions marked by variable sound; in the present Pearl set they are offered to the public for the first time in what we are told is the best sound obtainable from the original tapes, or from copies of the originals.

There is little musically similar about the cases of Ervin Nyiregyházi and Adelina de Lara, except for their disappearance and then partial rediscovery through the medium of recordings made in old age. Nyiregyházi's playing, because of his concentration on the flashiest and most meretricious pieces of Liszt in vulgar and souped-up performances, represented a throwback to a now dead tradition of mindless pianistic display before mindless audiences. By contrast, de Lara's playing takes the high road of total dedication to what is universally acknowledged as great music.

Because there is so little understanding these days of what exactly it is that a great

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pianist does, I think it would be useful at this point to place the whole idea of keyboard performance in some kind of intellectual context, to explain briefly just what it seems to me is involved in the playing of the most important piano works for an audience. It can be briefly, though certainly unsatisfactorily, put: to be a great pianist is to be so in command of the means of performance that the foundation necessary for the communication of the character of the performer, no less than of the music, can be taken for granted.

It must not be thought that what I have called the "foundation" means absolute, constant, and replicable accuracy; the great piano recordings of the past include performances in which there are, as the old saw goes, enough wrong notes to write another piece. Nor does this "foundation" mean musicological scholarship, fidelity to the composer's presumed wishes, or knowledge of or a subservience to the regnant performance style of the day; the great pianists of the past have rarely been scholars, have always been supreme egotists, and have invariably made styles, not reflected them.

The issue here is command: pianistic, musical, and what for want of a better word I must call emotional. Pianistic command—it must be stated over and over again—in these days of perfect performances made by tape splicing is by no means simply a matter of hitting all the right notes. It is also by no means simply a matter of the greatest facility in traversing the most difficult passages, for it is a sad fact that the most difficult passages from a purely digital standpoint are usually to be found in the musically thinnest and least interesting pieces.

In technical terms, the basis of pianistic command is firm tone and firm rhythm. Firm tone refers to the depth and articulation of the sound the pianist draws from the piano in individual notes, melodic and running passages, and chords; firm rhythm refers to the solidity of the basic metrical pulse with which the pianist communicates chosen tempos, the natural flow with which those tempos are varied, and the crispness with which rhythmic patterns are made clear and memorable to the listener.

Musical command involves, at the outset, the ability to make clear the differences between musical styles. Even more important, it requires the ability to keep in mind the structure of the work being played, to make clear to the listener how the different sections and features of the work fit into a coherent plan devised by the composer and also to some extent by the performer. Above all, musical command makes it possible for the performer to keep the listener aware that the work has a beginning, middle, and end, and to keep him aware of just where the composer, the performer, and by implication the listener is in the work.

Emotional command is perhaps more succinctly put by the word "personality." The most frequent use of emotional command, of course, is to impress the performance and the performer on the audience. In this use, it is emotional command which distinguishes one performer and performance from another; it is emotional command which enables each musical performance to become a distinct entity in the mind and the memory of each listener. It need hardly be added that it is this use of emotional command which is responsible for the making and keeping of performing careers.

There is another, and perhaps higher, use of what I have chosen to call emotional command. This use involves the putting of the performer's power at the service of the music being played, so that the impression of vibrant personality not only appears to stem from, but actually does stem from, the musical work rather than from the performer's superficial individuality. For listeners of one bent—and Harold Schonberg would seem to belong in this camp—it is the performer's personality in a relatively pure state which makes music come to life; for listeners of what some would call a more serious orientation, the submerging of the performer's personality in the composer's work of art is required for that work of art to come across in undefiled form. But either way, the existence of a powerful performing

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personality is a *sine qua non* for the communication of music.

There is now a vogue, made possible by the existence of sound recording, for the great musical performers of the past one hundred years; it is this vogue which underlies the rapturous reception which this Pearl set is receiving and undoubtedly will continue to receive. There are indeed, on hundreds of old 78 RPM records now being well transferred piecemeal to LP and compact discs, remarkable performances, many of them involving illustrious pianists. In this regard, I think immediately of the large recorded repertory of Artur Schnabel, Edwin Fischer, Alfred Cortot, and Walter Gieseking, of the early discs of Arthur Rubinstein and Vladimir Horowitz, of the few recordings of Josef Hofmann and the almost forgotten Ricardo Viñes, and of the extraordinary performances of Sergei Rachmaninoff. Some of these pianists—especially Hofmann—had great technical equipment; others—in particular Fischer—possessed much more limited resources. Some of them—Schnabel and Cortot in particular—at times tended to be sloppy; others—Gieseking and Rachmaninoff, for example—were usually immaculate executants. Some of them—Schnabel and Fischer among them—were "intellectual"; others—Cortot in particular—were often outrageously "romantic." But all of them demonstrated that triple *command* which seems so necessary to the existence of piano performance on the highest level.

Adelina de Lara, on the evidence of the seven LPs in this set devoted to her playing, did not possess this command. It will be argued that these performances come from her old age and not from her vigorous youth or solid middle age. The only possible answer to this rejoinder must be that one can only listen to what is before one; one cannot listen to that which, for whatever regrettable reasons, never existed. On these records at least, de Lara sounds not like a great pianist, but like a teacher doggedly demonstrating for students how the pieces go.

I would not want what I have just written to be taken as an indictment of piano teachers, or even as a reflection on the necessary practice of music teachers playing for their students. I am doing nothing more there than stating the obvious: there is a world of difference between knowing well enough how works go to be able to communicate them to students in the private atmosphere of a lesson and being a great performer. De Lara's playing satisfies the first requirement. But, despite all the understandable historical nostalgia which is being brought to these records, it does not satisfy the second.

There seems little point in attempting to describe de Lara's performances on these discs in any detail. There are so many wrong notes as to make the harmonies obscure; tempos are often physically out of control, not so much in speed as in their headlong, hurtling, character; the difficult rhythms Schumann writes are often distorted out of recognition for technical reasons; the piano tone is heavy and unvaried. And there is in these performances no communication of the differences between these great works of Schumann—between the light and graceful fantasy of the *Carnaval,* the moody introspection of the *Fantasiestücke* opus 12, the earthy, quasi-peasant humor of the *Faschingsschwank aus Wien,* the virtuoso display characteristic of the *Etudes symphoniques,* the massive architectural structure of the *Fantasie,* and the small, gentle scale of the *Kinderszenen.*

Matters do not improve, furthermore, when we come to de Lara's performances of music by composers other than Schumann. The Brahms-Haydn Variations for two pianos are so disfigured by caution, technical incompetence, and a certain weak-kneed sentimentality as to seem almost unrecognizable. The Beethoven 32 Variations, a testing piece for any virtuoso pianist (and beautifully recorded as such in the early 1930s by Horowitz), becomes in de Lara's hands a mass of stops, lurches, and oozings. There is in fact a prevailing character to all these performances by de Lara. This character is one of undifferentiated dullness, of the dogged grinding out of music well beyond the pianist's capacities as a performer. It

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would be sad if the nostalgia buffs were to have their way and convince anyone young and talented that technical incompetence, nondescript emotional content, and the infirmities of age were qualities to be replicated.

Thus, far from making the case that there is a great line of descent from Clara Schumann in which the artists of today should humbly and gladly take their place, these records by Ilona Eibenschütz, Fanny Davies, and Adelina de Lara accomplish exactly the opposite. So massive is my disappointment in these records that I find it hard to avoid asking more basic questions. Even assuming the task could be accomplished, is there a supreme value in playing this music as Clara Schumann said it should be played? Can it really be the case that Robert Schumann's piano music exists best, or perhaps exists only, in performances that in some obscure way have been mediated through his widow? Is tradition to be the final guide to how great music should be interpreted?

If the art of piano playing is to go on as a living artistic organism, the answers to these questions must be unequivocally "no." The proper relation of a performer to a work of music is directly to that work, not to that work as it has been digested, merchandised, and domesticated by generations of other performers. The essence of great piano music, whether Robert Schumann's or any other composer's, is in our best contemporary perception of the text of the music, not in the way it has been performed in the near and distant past. Each generation must find its own way back to the hallowed works of the past, so that they may be possessed directly. It was this act of re-discovery that made performances great in the past, when they were indeed great. The same is true for today's artists. There is nothing for contemporary pianists in these sadly deficient recordings—even if they were made by pupils of Clara Schumann.

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Theater

Beyond method acting

by Mimi Kramer

. . . the playhouse . . . was little more than a shell. . . . Through the planks of its floor at high tide the bay could be seen and heard and smelled. Under Cook's direction an ingenious stage was built. Only ten by twelve feet, it was sectional and mobile and could be slid backward onto the end of the wharf through the two wide doors at the rear of the theater, to provide an effect of distance. Those doors, through which fishermen had once hurled their catch, could be flung apart to expose the most realistic sea backdrop any theater ever had. . . .

—description of the Provincetown Players' Wharf Theater from Arthur and Barbara Gelb's biography of Eugene O'Neill

Certainly, one of the infallible signs that Coarse Drama is going on is the fact that the traditional roles of actor and audience are reversed. The actor is being himself while the audience are playing a part. . . .

—from Michael Green's *The Art of Coarse Acting*

It says in my notes for the evening of April 29, "'It's a little late in the day for regrets'" —which isn't exactly the line that James Tyrone is meant to deliver in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Whether those are the words Jack Lemmon actually uttered on the stage of the Broadhurst Theatre that night or simply the ones I heard, I can't say for sure. They're what I wrote down; and next to them, in parentheses, I seem to have added the statement, "I'm close to tears."

The experience of being moved in a theater isn't the sort of thing you forget—meaning it isn't the sort of thing you generally need to write down. So coming across the entry, some days ago, I was momentarily at a loss: I couldn't think why I'd made it. I had to go back to the play and find the reference, and even then it was a minute or two before I remembered.

Tyrone had been telling his younger son Edmund the story of his acting career.

> That God-damned play I bought for a song and made such a success in—a great money success—it ruined me . . . . I didn't want to do anything else, and by the time I woke up to the fact I'd become a slave to the damned thing . . . it was too late. They had identified me with that one part, and didn't want me in anything else. They were right, too. I'd lost the great talent I once had through years of easy repetition . . . .

It's the speech that makes casting an actor like Jack Lemmon in the role of Tyrone so dangerous, for the story he tells is not all that different from Lemmon's own. Fortunately, though, Tyrone's speech isn't really about acting: it's about money, the character of the miser, and the forces driving him on—an insatiable fear and longing. "What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder . . . ." is the line that comes before the one I wrote down. I can call nothing back now of whatever emotion made me pick up

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my pen, but I remember thinking I'd better get something down in a hurry because memory is a funny thing, and weeks later I might not remember that Jonathan Miller's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* had been something that good.

Jack Lemmon's performance as James Tyrone was nothing less than a miracle, but not because it was great. The miracle lay in the fact that for once the actor wasn't playing himself. Unfortunately, he wasn't really playing anyone else. Great performances came from Kevin Spacey and Bethel Leslie as Jamie and Mary Tyrone. But Lemmon's performance suffered from the same thing that dogged Jessica Tandy's Amanda Wingfield two seasons ago: the star's reluctance to portray a character less sympathetic than himself. Miller had got Lemmon to shed his mannerisms—the wince, half-grimace, half-stammer, and half-hitch turn of the head that make up his acting persona, that familiar mask of amiable integrity; what Miller could not get him to shed were the amiability and integrity. Unfortunately, James Tyrone is not an amiable or responsible man: meanness and childish vanity are his salient characteristics. But while it was endlessly possible to sympathize with Lemmon's Tyrone, it was never possible to dislike him—which left a sort of gap at what should have been the play's core.

Still, if Lemmon's performance didn't rise to greatness, nearly everything else about Jonathan Miller's production did: the set, for instance, and the way it cleverly evoked in the Tyrone's living room the way-station feeling that everyone in the house keeps complaining about. The room was dominated by a massive staircase and grand piano, both of which seemed to be beckoning us toward the door, and between each scene the lights dimmed out on an uninhabited stage. Especially good were the liberties Miller had taken with the text of the play, the overlapping dialogue and all the chopping and changing he'd done. Purists, I know, will object. I'm told of an O'Neill scholar who wrote to the *Times* to protest the Miller production. And a friend reports that at the performance he attended a man rose from his seat at intermission and began to shout, "It's not O'Neill!" Maybe it wasn't. All I can say is that it was better than any O'Neill I've ever seen.

For me, O'Neill has always been an exercise in tedium: hours and hours spent listening to relatively unremarkable people hurl accusations at one another. It is the dominant topos in American realist theater—the Crisis of Family Revelations. Willy and his sons in the kitchen; Albee's George and Martha hammering away at each other; the tetchy couple in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. "Gee, Rubin, how come you slugged me just now?" "Well, Cora, I find it difficult to make love with you nattering on about money all the time . . . ." What has always seemed to me fundamentally *unrealistic* in American realist drama is the quality of revelation being made in these climactic sequences: the notion that no one would ever have said any of these things before. Jonathan Miller's overlapping dialogue got rid of this problem. With characters talking across each other, and laughingly interrupting to finish off one another's sentences, you knew that no one on the stage of the Broadhurst Theatre was saying anything they hadn't all heard before, hundreds and hundreds of times. O'Neill actually wrote very few lines that wouldn't benefit by having someone talk over them, so it isn't as though there was that much damage to be done. In any case, most of the overlapping was done with lines that don't really bear a solo delivery (or the ponderous, pause-laden treatment they tend to get from American method actors). In fact, though, you didn't miss a word: instead, pressing forward in your seat—the way one sometimes presses forward to hear the unfamiliar strains of Shakespeare's English—you found yourself listening more closely to what was being said, and hearing more.

The overlapping dialogue in Miller's production did more to create a semblance of life than all the "stammering" and "faithful realism" of O'Neill's fog people. The production as a whole, moreover, suggested

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something about what is wrong with American approaches to O'Neill in general. It's the same thing that's wrong with American Chekhov, that relentless insistence on presenting the world exactly as the characters in the play see it. Jonathan Miller's *Long Day's Journey* was good for the same reason that English productions of Chekhov are better than ours: he had his actors playing O'Neill for comedy, secure in the wisdom that all of the drama and tragedy would emerge of their own accord.

This earnestness, this consistent refusal on the part of American Chekhov to recognize the comedy in any of the characters or events being presented, is as much a function of method acting itself as of the aesthetic that produced it; for American naturalism emulates Stanislavsky in nothing so much as in his humorlessness. It is blind to irony, baffled by comedy and satire—but then, it was only ever interested in literal truth. American realism thought it had no more to teach us than the facts of how life is or how a particular character feels. Miller discovered something in O'Neill that few of us had ever dreamed was there: dramatic irony. He created a tension between our experience and the experience of the Tyrones and, in doing so, brought out a far more moving truth than any of the case histories, accusations, and incidents of the past that were flying about the stage. For what you actually heard, pressing forward in your seat, were all the little lies and half-truths, the inconsistencies and half-confirmations—the discrepancy between what people say and what their behavior indicates—that *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is really about.

That an English director should have something to teach Americans about how to bring Chekhov to life, or late O'Neill, seems somehow ahistorical. After all, the realism of O'Neill was born of the same artistic impulse that has made Stanislavsky the dominant force in acting and stage direction in this country. And method acting itself was specifically invented to bring life to the plays of Chekhov: it was twinborn with them, by Stanislavsky, out of the Moscow Art Theatre. If there's anything we Americans ought to be able to do better than the English, it's Chekhov and late O'Neill.

Jonathan Miller's production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* was an indictment of the dominant aesthetic underlying American theater. Another indictment of that aesthetic recently came from a rather unexpected quarter: a book about acting written by a group of young American actors. Published by Random House last spring, *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* is just what it sounds like: a how-to book that seeks to demystify certain aspects of the acting profession. To the general reader it is of interest less for the specific advice it offers than for what that advice suggests generally about where we have come to in our practical thinking about the nature of theater. According to its six authors—Melissa Bruder, Lee Michael Cohn, Madeleine Olnek, Nathaniel Pollack, Robert Previto, and Scott Zigler—the book grew out of an exercise their teacher, the playwright David Mamet, had assigned them during a number of acting workshops that he has conducted at various times in New York, Chicago, and Vermont. The authors have since formed a group called the Atlantic Theatre Company which operates out of Chicago and Vermont. (I don't know why Vermont keeps coming into it: I imagine somebody's father had a barn.)

Of course, there is no dearth of textbooks for the aspiring actor. What's interesting about this one is that it represents the testimony of fourth-generation American actors—actors who will have been taught by students of the students of the disciples of Stanislavsky. In view of who they are, what they have to say is a little surprising: they say that it is impossible for an actor to *become* the character he is playing, that *becoming the character* is not even an actor's job; they say that character is "an illusion created by the words the playwright has written" and, for the purposes of performance, "exists only on the printed page"; they say that the actor need never "gear up emotionally for a scene," that the concept of "emotional prep-

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aration" is one he "need not bother with"; they say, in fact, that the actor is onstage not "to have an experience . . . but to help tell a story."

From the standpoint of American method acting, all this is blasphemy. Method acting believed that the actor's primary obligation is to be faithful to nature and psychological truth—a revolutionary idea back in 1897 when Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko first met and founded the Moscow Art Theatre. What they were chiefly rebelling against was the kind of theater that James Tyrone is talking about in *Long Day's Journey Into Night,* in which audiences flocked to see, not art, not acting or a play, but a familiar performance: a famous actor playing a famous role in a famous way. Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko looked at the artificial, declamatory style of nineteenth-century theater and concluded (rightly) that the behavior of the stage actor had nothing to do with the way people really behave, that representation of emotion in the romantic theater had been reduced to a repertoire of stock attitudes and gestures: this pose for grief, another for fear, still another for anger or surprise.

Stanislavsky's answer was to reject the idea of *representation of emotion* altogether. His "system" asked the actor to strive for real feeling, rather than to affect the semblance of an experience or emotion. It wasn't enough to feign sleep: you had to lie there remembering the sensation of feeling sleepy. It wasn't enough to present a heart-rending picture of starvation: you had to remember what it actually feels like to be hungry. It wasn't enough to manifest depression, to shed tears, even—you actually had to feel sad. Any suggestion of artifice in acting was anathema to Stanislavsky. The very concept of simulation smacked of emptiness and charlatanism. Method acting sought to put onstage not an image of reality but reality itself. For Stanislavsky, illusion was a dirty word.

It is blasphemous for the authors of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* to speak of the "illusion" of character, to treat it as a literary or artistic construct. It is blasphemous for them to suggest that speculating on how a character might take his tea or blow his nose, what kind of underwear he would sport, "does not create a life" in the actor. Method acting taught us to go below the surface of the costume or the words on the page. It taught us to follow the character home and ruminate on the details of his offstage life and past—his childhood, his dreams, anxieties, and disappointments. It taught us to live the role rather than just portray it. So it is blasphemous for these upstarts to say that actors can never become the characters they play. For method acting, *becoming the character* was the whole point.

To appreciate how extraordinary it is for these actors to be saying the things they're saying, you have to know something about how pervasive the teaching of method acting has become in this country, and the kind of influence it exerts on the minds of its children. "Most acting training is based on shame and guilt," says David Mamet in his (characteristically brief) introduction to *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*:

> If you have studied acting, you have been asked to do exercises you didn't understand, and when you did them, as your teacher adjudged, badly, you submitted guiltily to the criticism . . . . As you did these exercises, it seemed that everyone around you understood their purpose but you—so, guiltily, you learned to pretend . . . .

There's a nice little song on this theme from *A Chorus Line*: it tells of the humiliation and degradation that an aspiring actress, Morales, suffers at the hands of an acting teacher at the High School of Performing Arts because she feels "nothing" while playing theater games. Her revenge, on hearing later that the teacher has died, is to feel "nothing."

Morales doesn't refer to any specific technique or approach to acting. She doesn't have to. David Mamet never mentions "method acting" by name, or Viola Spolin's

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improvisational theater games. Neither do the authors of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*. The point is that you don't need to have studied acting professionally to be familiar with these things. Method acting and theater games are what you learn when you study acting just about anywhere in this country. You learn to think that you are smelling burnt toast or coffee or gasoline when none is there. (This exercise is to develop your "sense memory.") You learn "the mirror game," where two people stand face to face and take turns trying to mirror one another's movements exactly while looking only into one another's eyes. (This exercise is to develop your "peripheral vision.") You learn to stand in the middle of a circle, fall stiffly backward, and pray that another actor will catch you. (This exercise is to develop your sense of "trust.") You lie on the floor while someone talks droningly about a "magic cloud" passing overhead and you learn to believe that each part of your body the cloud passes over has become too heavy to lift. (I never knew what this exercise was for.) You learn to do "substitution improvs," where you follow a character through a succession of situations, becoming (*clap!*) now Joan of Arc babysitting for the neighbors, (*clap!*) now Joan of Arc at the junior prom, (*clap!*) now Joan of Arc in a lifeboat. Junior proms and lifeboats figure prominently in the minds of method acting teachers, so, over the years, you learn a lot about how various literary characters would behave in boats (Hedda Gabler? Ophelia? Dracula?) or on a first date. Method acting—or some version of it—is what you tend to learn when you study acting in this country, because it's what most people who teach acting were taught themselves.

Method acting was what was taught at the small liberal-arts college I attended in the mid-1970s, and it was taken very seriously indeed. To walk into the "professional" theater at Swarthmore was like walking into bedlam: in every corner writhed a theater major and the air was filled with the cries of actors coming to terms with themselves, echoing like the shrieking of the damned. I'd pretty much had my fill of this sort of thing when I got to Swarthmore, so I kept away from the acting side of things, for most of the time—until, in my senior year, I took part in a theater-department production of *Arms and the Man*.

A friend was directing the play as part of a final project in a directing course and for some reason had been allowed to cast actors from outside the department. Only one member of the cast, in fact, had come from within the department, a fellow named Luigi. He was playing the part of a soldier in the first act. As the lady of the house I had to usher him on- and offstage. He was an intense young man, eager to do a good job, and shortly after rehearsals started, he came to me with a suggestion: he was having trouble with his inner monologues, he said, and thought we would do well to invent a little offstage dialogue to go through when I came offstage to get him.

Later, I used to get a lot of mileage out of that story, particularly in theatrical circles at Oxford: people would fall about laughing and I'd laugh with them. But I was raised on method acting. It's what I was taught. And I always thought someday a terrible judgment would be visited on me for laughing at Luigi—I'd be struck dead or the god of theater would send a basket down for me. Even now, I can't help feeling it is wrong to laugh at Luigi. And it is wrong—wrong and flippant: Luigi only wanted to do a good job and to mock him strikes at the root of method acting's most fundamental beliefs. Stanislavsky said: "There are no small roles, there are only small actors," a tenet without which professionalism in theater cannot exist. All the same, I can't help thinking that anyone who requires elaborate psychological mnemonics to deliver four lines onstage belongs in some other line of work.

I had the same feeling reading *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* I used to get when talking about Luigi. It was a little like reading a dirty book, in fact, I kept thinking someone was going to come in and take it away. I should stress, though, that *A Practical Handbook* isn't written to shock. It isn't at

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all an angry or contemptuous book. The authors are not dismissive of Stanislavsky: they quote him respectfully and recommend his writings. Only in the *sous conversation* does one hear the same whisper of generational conflict one heard in the opening sentence of Mamet's introduction. It's not the voice of revolutionaries, burning their Equity cards and calling brother actors to arms. It's more like children secreted off in a room together: the oldest ones are telling the others about grown-ups—what they will say and how much of it to believe.

More than anything else, what one senses about these actors, reading their book, is that they feel method acting has failed them because it has failed to teach them what they want to know. Well, method acting *has* failed. It has failed us all. To appreciate the extent of its failure, one need only attend a performance by one of the *grandes dames* of the New York "method" stage. Uta Hagen's performance as Kitty Warren, this year, in the Roundabout Theatre's production of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* was an embarrassment: she couldn't sustain a consistent character, let alone sustain a consistent accent. In the course of the evening she "became" eight or nine different people, none of whom had anything in common with one another except a grand actress manner, or anything in common with humanity except a certain resemblance to Uta Hagen. Her disciple, Geraldine Page, is another terrible actress. New York audiences have seen quite a bit of Miss Page recently—not only in Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* but in all those plays the Mirror Repertory Company has produced in the last few years—and whether she is playing Sam Shepard, Clifford Odets, or Jean Giraudoux, her performance consists of trotting out the same vocal and physical mannerisms that characterized her acceptance speech at the Academy Awards this year. Whoever Geraldine Page "becomes," she is always herself.

But that's the joke about method acting. It has ended by reproducing all of the things it set out to correct in nineteenth-century theater: the staginess and inflexibility, the concept of the self-serving star. Look at the roster of "great" method actors: not only Uta Hagen and Geraldine Page, but Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, Karl Malden, Julie Harris, Jason Robards, Eli Wallach, Ben Gazzara, Shelley Winters, and—yes—Jack Lemmon, all of them actors who cannot act, who can only "live truthfully under the imagined circumstances"—as themselves.

It's a painful thing to have to admit. After all, the experience of being moved in a theater—any sort of theater—isn't the sort of thing you forget. There is no one who has not been moved by one of these actors, who will not flinch at the mention of one or another of these names and think inwardly, "Oh no, not him!" or "Not her!" Some of Jack Lemmon's screen performances, for instance, are very dear to me—*Some Like It Hot, Mr. Roberts, The Fortune Cookie, Days of Wine and Roses*—so I think about crossing out his name. Next minute I think about crossing Brando off the list because of his smile at the end of *The Wild One,* or Marilyn Monroe because of the "toothpaste" speech in *Some Like It Hot,* or Julie Harris because of the ferris-wheel scene in *East of Eden,* or Shelley Winters because of *Lolita.* All of these actors have given great screen performances. Or rather, like the current generation of method actors—Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, Jack Nicholson, and Robert De Niro—all of them had in them one great performance, which made them famous and to which they remained faithful. The way James O'Neill remained faithful to the role of Edmund Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo.* Today audiences flock to see Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, and Robert De Niro onstage in much the way the nineteenth-century audiences must have flocked to see Eugene O'Neill's father. Method acting didn't eliminate artificiality in stage acting, it only updated it, giving rise to a more individual style of mannerism. It didn't teach the actor how to be a chameleon, either, merely how to turn every character into himself.

Inevitably, one wants to know to what extent this failure can be attributed to

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Stanislavsky himself. How far is American method acting a reflection of what he actually believed and taught and practiced? Indeed, what accounts for his extraordinary influence on American theater in the first place?

That method acting gained a kind of foothold in this country which it never established in England has partly to do with a national temperament, I think, and partly with the spirit of a time. Stanislavsky's preoccupation with "truth" has always appealed to the American character: we wear our sincerity the way an old soldier wears his scars—fondly and with the satisfaction of remembered pain. But the kind of photographic realism that method acting was after would also have been in keeping with the sensibility that governed the period in which "serious" theater was first emerging in America. Actually, Stanislavsky's influence on American theater has a precise analogue in the importance that Brecht would come to have for a generation of British playwrights and directors following the Berliner Ensemble's visit to London in 1956. The Moscow Art Theatre had come to New York in 1923 and made a tremendous impression on the intellectual and artistic community. When Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg were founding the Group Theatre in the late Twenties, it became one of their aims to train a permanent company according to the principles of Stanislavsky's "system." In a sense, method acting is with us because Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg invented "serious" theater in America and method acting was what they were interested in.

The first question is more difficult to answer. American method acting stands at a distance of fifty years, many ocean crossings and several theatrical generations from Stanislavsky: his doctrine has suffered as all doctrine must when it is carried far from home. Certainly there are whole aspects of Stanislavsky's "system" that American method acting only ever paid lip service to, and others that fell by the wayside: the rigorous vocal and physical training, for instance, which Stanislavsky always stressed as being

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an indispensable part of the actor's "preparation" was gradually replaced in this country by the improvisational theater games which emphasized self-awareness, self-discovery, and self-expression at the expense of technique.

No one would argue that what gets taught today under the general heading of "method acting" has much to do with Stanislavsky's "system"; but it's difficult to know exactly which idea or which distortion of which idea crept in where, when, or with whom. What Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, and Stella Adler first taught at the Group Theatre was what they had learned from two disciples of Stanislavsky, Maria Ouspenskaya, and Richard Boleslavksy—former members of the Moscow Art Theatre who had come to New York to found the American Laboratory Theatre in 1922—or rather, what they thought they'd learned; for one thing the disciples of Stanislavsky have never agreed upon is what he actually meant.

There is, moreover, a vast discrepancy between what is written and what is actually taught. There are tenets no method actor would ever admit to that he nevertheless holds. Method acting has always maintained a fundamentally hypocritical stance toward the mechanics of theater, for instance: publicly it acknowledges the need for a playwright, an audience, and a director; privately it deplores them and holds them in contempt. But no method actor would ever admit this. In fact, few method actors would admit to being method actors. Dustin Hoffman probably wouldn't. Uta Hagen certainly wouldn't. Yet method acting is certainly what Hoffman practices and what Hagen preaches in her widely read book *Respect For Acting*. It is what she and Herbert Berghof have taught at HB Studio in New York for forty years.

Out of this morass of caginess and uncertainty one thing stands out: the importance of a dispute over the interpretation of "the method" that arose between Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman in 1934. It centered on Stanislavsky's concept of "Affective Memory," the idea that in order to act a role, the actor had to draw on his own experience and emotional memory. Clurman and Stella Adler thought that Strasberg was making too much of this notion and, as a result, was encouraging actors to concentrate too much on self-discovery and not enough on an analysis of the play. So alarmed were they by what Strasberg was doing that in 1935 Stella Adler went to Paris to meet with Stanislavsky and ask him who was right. She came back to New York with the information that, according to Stanislavsky, they were: Strasberg was overdoing it with the emotional stuff; but Strasberg dismissed the verdict. In any case, the Group Theatre was having other problems at the time, and the controversy over method acting was interpreted as part of a power struggle between the two directors, which it may very well have been. (Strasberg had been the dominant force in the company since its inception in 1931.) Strasberg resigned in 1937 and the Group disbanded two years later. History records that, out of the controversy, it was Clurman who emerged the victor—because he walked off with Clifford Odets and *Awake and Sing*! But history seems to be wrong. Today it is Strasberg's name we associate with the teaching of method acting, while "Stella Adler" is just an advertisement in *Backstage* and Clurman's a name above a storefront theater that keeps changing hands.

It's interesting to speculate on what American theater would be like today if something closer to Clurman's version of method acting had become the one most commonly taught. For most of the evils of American method acting stem from that original distortion on Strasberg's part of the concept of "Affective Memory." The Clurmans really *were* right: Strasberg had given the idea an importance it should never have had. For Stanislavsky, "Affective Memory" had been one important element in a complex system—a sort of moral anchor intended to keep theater on the straight and narrow, ridding the stage of what was fraudulent or phoney. But equally important to Stanislavsky (at least in theory) was an

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analysis of the play that tied the actor's emotional responses and extrapolations to some notion of context.

In Strasberg's hands, the whole concept of "the given circumstances" fell by the wayside, for Strasberg taught the actor to bring to the role "the truth of his own emotions," and nothing else. What Clurman and Adler could see that Strasberg could not was that in forcing the actor to draw always on the same wellsprings of character, experience and behavior, Strasberg was in danger of creating only another sort of actor who could not act. "What would I do if I were in that situation?" is the question the American method actor always asks himself; never ". . . and if I were somebody else, what then?" Strasberg's approach to method acting had another, more serious consequence for theater: it made a mockery of the idea of the audience. For when the actor's own feelings became the standard by which the validity of a performance was to be gauged, the audience ceased to be an entity upon which theater was supposed to have an effect. "How was that?" asks the naïve method actor. The answers are always the same—"How did it feel? Did it feel right?"—until, finally, the method actor stops asking. He is no longer naïve.

Of course, some element of this attitude was implicit in Stanislavsky's own thinking about the theater. He wanted the quality of life onstage to be identical to what you would see if the "fourth wall" of a house were removed. He wanted actors to be carrying on as if no one was watching, like ants at a picnic, oblivious to the little crowd of day-trippers observing their movements. Unfortunately, the quality of stage action has about as much to do with natural habit as life on the moon—and for the same reasons. The stage actor inhabits wholly different worlds of space and time, owing to the physical conditions of theater. You cannot "talk normally" on a stage and hope to be heard; just so, you cannot behave normally onstage, just carrying on as though it were real life, and hope to have an effect on anyone but yourself. The fact is that an audience is there, a necessary part of the theatrical process if the experience of theater is to be anything more than make-believe.

When the Moscow Art Theatre came to New York in 1923 they brought with them four productions: Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and *Three Sisters,* Gorky's *The Lower Depths* and Alexei Tolstoy's historical drama *Tsar Fyodor.* This last had been the MAT's first-ever production in 1899 and it was their *pièce de résistance,* a realistic extravaganza, remarkable chiefly for its fetishistic attention to realistic detail and historical accuracy.

In a famous essay in *The New Republic,* Stark Young raved about the Chekhov; about the other two productions he was more circumspect. He was decidedly unimpressed by the "quality of the performance" in the Gorky play, for instance, and he found Stanislavsky's performance "the worst of all." Young was even less impressed with the company's showpiece. On *Tsar Fyodor* he wrote that he found "a complete air of human beings living there in the familiar ways of men," adding, "but I cared nothing about it":

> I have no interest in poetry taken as prose, and almost no interest in history taken, but for its mask of antique trappings, as contemporaneous human life. For the truth of history seems to me to be a combination of actuality and remoteness. Of this sixteenth-century matter of men, equipage and event, the reality to me is the idea of it . . . . In other words, in the performance of an imperial ancient story like this of the *Tsar Fyodor* I should like the style of the acting to achieve not the studied naturalness that we take daily as the ways of men but the form, the magic of distance and scope, the conscious arrangement, the artifice and logic, that would create in my mind the idea. And with jewels and arms and clothes I can see merely correct history of them in museums if I choose; what I want on the stage is these things translated into stage terms, restated with that lustre and relief . . . that would make them art.

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"A combination of actuality and remoteness": it's as good a definition of art as any I've run across. What Stark Young perceived as far back as 1923 was the basic distinction Stanislavsky had failed to make between nature and art.

I don't mean to suggest that method acting served no purpose. If Stark Young raved about the Moscow Art Theatre Chekhov I've no doubt it was because he was seeing something he'd never seen before. But it is important to keep in mind how primitive the conditions of theatrical production were at the time of Stanislavsky's and Nemirovich-Danchenko's historic conversation in 1897. After all, one of the innovations they came up with during those eighteen hours of discussion was the idea of dimming the house lights. Stanislavsky wanted to rid the theater of an audience that sat there gnawing on chicken bones and chattering through the performance: his antidote was to adopt the fiction that the audience was not there. He wanted to rid theater also of the kind of actor that Michael Green describes in *The Art of Coarse Acting,* who tells his director, "'Laddie . . . . These moves were good enough for Sir Barry Jackson in 1924 and they ought to be good enough for you.'" The solution, obviously, was to insist that every breath or action taken onstage have some organic justification.

Every artistic movement rebels against the one before it and, in accomplishing what it set out to do, ends by making itself obsolete. Unfortunately, method acting was obsolete by the time it began taking hold in America; for as the English director Tyrone Guthrie pointed out in 1956, the theatrical conditions against which method acting had revolted had already ceased to exist. Moreover, the hold method acting developed on the mind of American theater was out of all proportion to what it had to teach us: for most of the little tricks of auto-suggestion and emotional by-play it institutionalized are really so basic to the business of "playacting" as to be almost instinctive. It's like what Olivier is supposed to have said to Dustin Hoffman: "Why don't you try acting for a change, dear boy? It's ever so much easier!" The truth is that all actors "gear up emotionally" for a scene. They just don't all make such a fuss about it.

No doubt I am overstating the case against method acting; but it is a case that calls for overstatement. Too much damage is being done, for one thing. By now the culture of method acting is moreover so deeply entrenched in American theater that to make any case against it is a little like crying for the moon. It's been tried before: members of the theatrical community have been issuing caveats to us about method acting for years—not only Stark Young and Tyrone Guthrie, but others after them and before. In 1921, in an article in *The Saturday Evening Post,* David Belasco, one of the earliest proponents of American "realism" warned against the disastrous consequences of an actor's over-identifying with his role, pointing out that "acting, like all arts, is symbolical." Robert Brustein, in an essay in *Third Theatre,* warned against the "subtext" in method acting becoming "a stratagem by which the actor ignores the playwright's meaning, substituting the feeling he himself finds to be more compelling." In 1956 Arthur Miller actually spoke out against Lee Strasberg in *The Paris Review,* describing him as "a force which is not for the good of theater." And in an essay in *Tulane Drama Review,* Robert Corrigan, former editor of that publication, warned that method acting had already had "insidious" effects and "may well have been harmful to the art of our theater."

Corrigan's essay is worth reviewing here. He describes method acting as "a two-edged sword that can do as much harm as good to the theater." For, he writes:

> . . . the Stanislavsky system, while it is the "only organic technique of acting in the modern theatre," [Clurman's words] has also tended to ignore the playwright and more often than not has transformed the director from one whose purpose is to order the production in such a way as to realize the play-

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> wright's intention on the stage, to a coach of a kind of acting that is very often artistically beside the point.

According to Corrigan, "in his insistence that the actor always be true to nature" Stanislavsky taught his students

> not how to act, not how to express the playwright's ideas, but how to relive as fully and believably as possible a certain experience . . . . The Stanislavsky-trained actor, who comes to depend only on life, only on honest personal experiences and the believable representation of these experiences, very likely will fail to reflect and express that particular vision which the playwright is striving to communicate in his play. If the actor fails to perceive how the playwright's intention transforms a natural incident into something else, then, no matter how truthful his representation of that incident may be, he will succeed only in giving the audience the event and not the author's transformation of that event . . .

It's essentially Stark Young's point about art and nature, but Corrigan takes the occasion to resurrect what is probably one of the most widely ignored of best-known facts in theater lore: that Chekhov hated Stanislavsky, thought he was a perfectly rotten actor and director and always maintained that the Moscow Art Theatre misrepresented his plays. Corrigan's point, specifically, is that Stanislavsky "failed as both an actor and a director (at least in Chekhov's opinion) because he interpreted each role in terms of the role alone rather than in terms of the play as a whole." Characters, in other words, whom Chekhov had meant us to see as comic or slightly absurd, had been taken at face value and on their own terms.

Which brings me back to Jonathan Miller, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*. If the latest attempt at a revisionist view of method acting comes from a group of actors, I think it is telling that they have a playwright behind them—particularly this playwright. David Mamet is more a satirist than a realist—which isn't to say that the characters he creates have no foundation in reality, but that they exist to serve a moral point. As a playwright Mamet is more interested in suggesting something *about life* than he is in merely representing it. You could not play a character like Shelly Levene or Ricky Roma (in *Glengarry Glen Ross*) completely from his own point of view, any more than you can play Chekhov's Astrov in *Uncle Vanya* from *his* point of view—as the consummate method actor F. Murray Abraham tried to play Astrov in the Andrei Serban production at La Mama several seasons ago.

What the authors of *A Practical Handbook* seem to be after is that "combination of actuality and remoteness" that Stark Young talks about. They offer what is essentially a variation on the Stanislavsky approach to "scene analysis" that requires the actor to achieve some imaginative and emotional distance from the character he is playing and from the dramatic context. Still, it's a mark of the strength of method acting's hold on us all that even the authors of *A Practical Handbook* underemphasize the crucial importance of the analysis of a play and what they call the "through-action." You can't create Oedipus as a character without taking stock of why Sophocles chose the particular words he did in creating him in the first place, any more than you can play Shelly Levene without considering why Mamet bothered to create him in the first place and why he thought we would care.

A Practical Handbook for the Actor is a book that cries out for a second edition: too much of what the authors are trying to say remains unclear to the actor-reader, and it will need much revision and much feedback from other members of the theatrical community before the book can be usefully seen as a pedagogical tool. What the authors attempt to teach is so clear in their own minds that they have failed to anticipate many of the problems that will arise for anyone coming to it—as most actors will be—burdened by the instincts and assumptions engendered by years and years of

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method and pseudo-method acting training. Probably one of the best things that could happen to theater right now would be for other actors to read the book and respond to it (as the authors invite readers to respond), offering insights into how their own experience either does or does not correspond with the approach suggested in *A Practical Handbook*. Let one of the theater publications like *American Theatre* or *Drama Review* start a dialogue between members of the theatrical community.

It's a late day for regrets and you can't reform American theater overnight. On the other hand, you have to try.

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Books

The obsessions of Marguerite Duras

by Fernanda Eberstadt

After the Second World War, a succession of French novelists—most famously Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Michel Butor—developed a kind of fiction which, though influenced by American writers like Ernest Hemingway, nonetheless took on qualities distinctly its own. The features which characterize what came to be known as the "nouveau roman" include, in the words of one (amazingly) sympathetic literary historian, "plotless stories from which motivation, the stock property of the traditional novel, is absent; nameless hero-narrators; banalities expressed by disarming clichés; absence of psychological verisimilitude." Much of this fiction is addressed to the reader in the second person singular and takes place in the present tense; what action there is transpires in cinematic, non-chronological quick-takes; the thought, often tinged with Marxist ideology, tends toward an inscrutable abstraction, a tricky relativism, a fretwork of paradox, in which life is found to be a death sentence, or silence a more telling form of speech. In the work of writers like Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, or Marguerite Duras, the deliberate banality of tone and obliqueness of narrative are used to describe bloodcurdling violence and extremes of sexuality.

The impassive surface and affectless protagonists that marked the French novel of the Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies held a special social significance: they were intended to mimic the doomed mediocrity of modern life, and in particular, to signal the bankruptcy of bourgeois society. It is no accident that some of these French novelists were members of the Communist Party, although being littérateurs, they inclined more toward nihilism than toward political activism. Thus, the nouveau roman—which has been called by some the "anti-novel"—served after the War as an eminently appropriate literary form for a demoralized nation.

In recent years, however, while its Marxist cousins in the field of critical theory have gained popularity abroad, the nouveau roman has fallen on hard times. Indeed, in the last several years, such pioneers as Nathalie Sarraute have turned instead to triumphantly readable semi-autobiographical blockbusters. Of those French intellectuals who have long been associated with the nouveau roman but who have emerged—at least intermittently—from its cryptic toils into a new accessibility and forthrightness of narrative, none is more famous than Marguerite Duras, today the leading lady of French letters, whose latest novel, *The Lover* (1984), won her the Prix Goncourt and became a best-seller both in Europe and in the United States.

Marguerite Duras was born in 1914 in Indochina, the daughter of two French schoolteachers. Her colonial upbringing provides inspiration for the sinister and exotic images that trail through her books—it also forms the subject both of an early novel, *The Sea Wall* (1950) and of its recent and

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more celebrated reworking, *The Lover.* Duras came to Paris in 1931 and obtained a law degree four years later. She worked as a secretary in the Department of Colonies—a post she left when the Germans occupied France in 1940, at which time Duras joined the Resistance. This experience is described in a recently published diary, *The War* (1986). She was also for a decade a member of the French Communist Party, about which she writes today with laconic contempt. Duras has led a full career both in print journalism and in television—she gained renown for her investigation of the Ben Barka affair of 1965, in which an exiled Moroccan leader was kidnapped and murdered in Paris, possibly with Gaullist complicity. Until recently, however, she has been best known abroad for her screenplays, of which the most celebrated is the 1961 *Hiroshima, Mon Amour,* directed by Alain Resnais.

Duras is at once a prolific and a parsimonious writer. She is the author of some fifteen novels, most of which are as brief as short stories and many of which she has converted into movies, plays, or other novels. Characters, place-names, lines of dialogue, incidents, and situations persistently recur throughout Duras's work, creating an atmosphere of claustrophobic self-referentiality. Thus, at the beginning of *The Lover,* when the teenaged heroine meets a Chinese millionaire in a black limousine, the author interjects, "Yes, it's the big funereal car that's in my books. It's a Morris Léon Bollée. The black Lancia at the French embassy in Calcutta hasn't yet made its entrance on the literary scene." In this manner, like a hostess who won't let her guests talk among themselves, Duras continually dins upon the reader the reminder that this is not life but fiction (in the more derogatory sense of something "made up") and, what's more, *her* fiction. This feeling of characters and events not experienced or truly believed but only fantasized infects even—or perhaps especially—those works which are the most "autobiographical."

Duras's novels in essence are meditations on the theme of an erotic love that leads to enslavement or death. Though there is much violence in her work, it is a violence of which her characters are not agents but rather complicit observers. In her first novel, *Les Impudents* (1943), the heroine covers up her brother's probable murder of his girlfriend. In her second novel, it is his murder of an uncle that she conceals. (The boy then kills himself.) In a skilled and energetic novella, *10.30 on a Summer Night* (1962), a woman on vacation in Spain engineers the escape of an unknown local who has just murdered his wife and her lover. The heroine dreams of starting a new life with the stranger and is offended when he repays her solicitude by committing suicide.

In contrast to the Gothic explosiveness of the subject matter, the atmosphere that pervades Duras's work is one of alcoholic lassitude, sloth, hypnotic passivity, boredom, and self-pity—or, conversely, the *dolce far niente* that comes from feeling one has nothing left to lose. It is no coincidence that most of the action in these novels takes place while their protagonists are on (extended) vacation. Duras's men and women sleep, drink, and wish they were dead: they are lackluster dolls who exercise no control over their destinies, and thus prime candidates for manipulation by a bossy author with much to say (though never directly) on the subjects of death, solitude, and nothingness.

In place of action is sensation in Duras's novels: the twin passions are narcissism and a longing to suffer. This longing frequently is sated by sexual voyeurism: the typical Duras heroine prods her boyfriend or husband into seducing her best friend so she can watch—a theme whose raciness may help to explain why Duras's work should have reached an audience wider than that usually attracted by experimental French fiction.

The absence of action, plot, or character development in Duras's fiction is not accidental but programmatic. Though her heroes are awash in capricious impulses and dull discontents, they are nonetheless not individual men and women at all, but rather generalized and allegorical stand-ins for

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concepts or psychological states. Thus, the French actress and Japanese architect who star in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*—two characters who seem continually to be shivering on the brink of an intense and genuine individuality—are constrained by their symbolic functions as the "reprieved" witnesses of man's inhumanity to man, here represented by the American atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima. "Hi-ro-shi-ma. That's your name." "That's my name. Yes. Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers-in France." These, the couple's parting words at the end of the film, permanently relegate character to geography.

Marguerite Duras is frequently commended for her beautiful prose style. The literary manner of these slender and oblique tales of heat, languor, and betrayal is simple. The sentences are short, dialogue is reduced to an exchange of obsessively repetitive soliloquies, scenes are brief and surreal. At its best, her prose achieves an incantatory insistence and a precison of incidental detail that can be arresting. (French readers have complained, however, about her involuted syntax and her shaky hold on grammar.) She is adept at summoning up locale and custom: a summer night's downpour in a Spanish village, underwater fishing in an Italian river, Chinese family photographs as a form of ancestor worship, or "the frightful loneliness of serving in outposts upcountry, stranded amid checkered stretches of rice, fear, madness, fever, and oblivion." In her finest pieces, moreover, Duras displays a certain gay tenacity which stands in defiant contrast to the haplessness of her characters, to the cryptic mumbo jumbo they utter, to the lack of narrative momentum, and indeed, to the portentousness of the authorial message: that only through a criminal "love unto death" can one escape from the truly fatal banality of human life.

This gay tenacity, which keeps her best books afloat, is evident, for instance, in an early novel, *The Sailor from Gibraltar. The Sailor* tells of a menial employee in the Department of Colonies who abandons job and mistress to sail the seas on the yacht of a rich woman in search of a seafaring murderer she once met. This book manages to cover in three hundred pages most of Duras's perennial themes: obsession, masochism, alcoholism, tropical torpor, sexual betrayal, sympathy for the murderer as the ultimate innocent. But for all its potential darkness of theme and lack of narrative purposiveness, in its second half *The Sailor from Gibraltar* winds up a tale of fantastic travels, which is as cheerful and absurd as a chapter from *The Adventures of Doctor Doolittle.*

The Sailor from Gibraltar was published in 1952. Since that time, Duras has mostly abandoned its note of high spirits and occupied herself with flat, stark narratives after the existentialist manner, such as the highly praised *The Square* (1955), in which two strangers on a park bench reveal the futility of their lives in sixty pages of poker-faced monologue. In this vein, too, is the execrable *Malady of Death* (1982), which has just appeared in English[1]—a short story about a doomed autistic stranger buying sex from another stranger eked out to sixty pages of elephantine print and addressed to the reader in the second person, subjective mood.

The Lover, which was published in France in 1984, heralds a return to more purposeful storytelling.[2] Though short on suspense and long on self-pity, it has the makings of a penny dreadful. Narrated in the first person and advertised as "semi-autobiographical," this novel tells of an impoverished French family—a widow schoolteacher and her three children—living in desperate gentility in upcountry Indochina in the late 1920s. The fifteen-year-old daughter, a fragile and precocious child, takes up with a Chinese millionaire, a misalliance which scandalizes the colony but one which the daughter pursues in order to save her mother from destitution. The Lover's black limousine picks up the little girl from school every day and brings her back to his seedy Saigon apart-

1 *The Malady of Death,* translated by Barbara Bray; Grove Press, 60 pages, $9.95.

2 *The Lover,* translated by Barbara Bray; Pantheon, 117 pages, $11.95.

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ment, where he ravishes her with feminine delicacy. The Lover—as he is referred to throughout—worships the child hopelessly and ruinously; he wants to take her away with him, but his father "won't let his son marry the little white whore." Nor does the heroine herself care for the Lover: rather, she joins with her family to exploit the wealth of this patsy of inferior race. Toward the end, the heroine sails for Paris, leaving the Lover a weeping and emasculated wreck. Back in France, she hears of his marriage to a Chinese girl of suitable family, and fantasizes that he will be unable to consummate the union for love of the little white whore. Years later, when the heroine has become a famous French author and intellectual, the Lover telephones her and confirms in a trembling voice that indeed "it was as before, that he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death." End of novel.

The Lover is the most elegantly written of Duras's works, and it has been well-served by its translator, Barbara Bray. Its prose is crisp and delicate. Moreover, the manic-depressive mother—a particularly French type of woman, at once hard-boiled and utterly impractical in her schemes—is portrayed at times with a rueful compassion which is markedly absent from Duras's previous work. But for all the novel's felicities of style, there is something essential that is very wrong with *The Lover*. Although it has been hailed by many critics as a work of eroticism and even grand passion, *The Lover* on the contrary is eroticism's very antithesis: a monument of brutal, blind, and unremitting feminine narcissism. The author is adept at capturing a lonely fifteen-year-old's rapt self-absorption: her yen for vampish clothing, her fondness for being lusted after by strange men, her hunger to test her sexual powers, and above all her desire to make an older man (preferably of inferior station) her love-slave, to incapacitate and destroy him for life. What is astonishing is that the author, fifty-five years after the "semi-autobiographical" events described, should record these deliciously self-gratifying dreams of conquest without distance, without qualm, without a hint of irony or self-knowledge. Astonishing, too, is that such a work should have been greeted by American reviewers—all female—as a true portrayal of (in the words of one of these) "the confounding nature of passion." (Some of the book's more sympathetic French critics have suggested gallantly that although the story of the affair with a Chinese millionaire must surely be imaginary, nonetheless it has validity as an allegory or as a Freudian fantasy.)

Nineteen eighty-six saw the American publication of *The War,* which appeared in France last year under the more accurate and revealing title *La Douleur.*[3] This is a collection of disparate sketches, some fictional, some detailing Duras's experiences in a Resistance network headed by François Mitterand. Of the "texts" that make up this volume, Duras instructs us: "Learn to read them properly: they are sacred."

Sacred or not, the most compelling is the title story, a 1944 diary which Duras tells us she recently discovered in a cupboard. The diary records Duras's weeks of waiting to find out if her husband has survived a Nazi concentration camp where he had been a political prisoner; it records her watching his slow recovery from hell, and her informing this silent stranger that their marriage is over and that she has left him for his best friend. This tale of sleepless nights, of rationing, of waiting, and of nursing "Robert L." back to life is delivered in a somnambulist's voice that muffles all distinctions between the trivial and the monumental. Much space and attention are devoted to analyzing every fluctuation and varying shade of the author's apathy, her headaches like malignant tumors, her wishing she were dead. Although at times the diary is electrifying in its cold precision, its self-dramatization expresses perfectly what one might call the tyrannical insensitivity of the neurasthenic. "No-one can know my struggle against visions of the black ditch," a typical

3 *The War: A Memoir,* translated by Barbara Bray; Pantheon, 183 pages, $13.95.

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passage runs. Another: "I feel very close to the death I wished for. It's a matter of indifference to me. I don't even think about it's being a matter of indifference. My identity is gone . . . . Sometimes I'm amazed I don't die." When her boyfriend reprimands her for self-indulgence, the author breaks into the "diary" to express parenthetically her enduring amazement at his insensitivity. Such passages alternate with descriptions of the husband that are at once tender and clinical, including a day-by-day catalogue of his bowel movements, detailed with an exhaustiveness worthy of the most fastidious anthropologist—a catalogue which surely exceeds a self-respecting man's worst nightmare of what his ex-wife the novelist might do to him in print.

The War, along with *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* and, to a lesser degree, *The Lover,* contains the most explicit declarations of Duras's political vision, which might best be described as a kind of aristocratic and aestheticized misanthropy: an attitude which in an earlier age would likely have attached itself to right-wing politics, but which in our own day is often to be found on the Left. As mentioned earlier, Duras was a member of the French Communist Party for some ten years. Her writing about the war and about politics—though littered with references to class consciousness, collectivism, racism, and "the people"—betrays the curious intellectual dodginess, the unwillingness to call things by their proper names, the reliance on opaque universalities, that mark the imagination of the fellow traveller. One of the most interesting features of Duras's writings on World War II, for instance, is her reticence on the subject of Germans and Nazism. As it happens, *The War* treats French collaborators with sympathy and tact; it is also blistering in its denunciation of De Gaulle, whom Duras excoriates for toadying to the United States by publicly mourning Roosevelt's death, and for his reluctance "to credit the people's suffering with a share in the victory." But the book is almost silent on the subject of the enemy against whom the war was fought (or, in France's case, not fought). The exception is an account of her role as the "girlfriend" of a Gestapo officer, later executed—an account which Duras tells us in her introduction she had suppressed for forty years out of consideration for the man's family, and that she was persuaded by friends to publish only for its utility in illustrating "the illusion that a person may exist solely as a dispenser of reward and punishment." (A high-sounding phrase which universalizes this particular member of the Nazi secret police out of existence.)

This same reticence is most apparent in Duras's screenplay, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour.* The film follows a twenty-four-hour love affair between a Japanese architect and a French actress who is working on a peace film in Hiroshima. Its theme is the banality of evil, as illustrated in flashbacks to World War II—but Duras's twin symbols of that war's barbarity are willfully selective: the American bombing of Hiroshima and the shaving of the heroine's head when she was a young girl for sleeping with a German soldier. Just in case the audience does not understand Duras's purpose here, she spells it out in *The War:* "If Nazi crime is not seen in world terms, if it isn't understood collectively, then that man in the concentration camp at Belsen who died alone but with the same collective soul and class awareness . . . has been betrayed. If you give a German and not a collective interpretation to the Nazi horror, you reduce the man in Belsen to regional dimensions. The only possible answer to this crime is to turn it into a crime committed by everyone. To share it. Just like the idea of equality and fraternity."

Duras's world outlook over the last forty years has changed remarkably little. Although today she writes of the Communist Party with scorn, it is a scorn consistent with the notion of a collective guilt which frees the individual—in this case, her—from responsibility for his beliefs and actions. In *The Lover,* Duras describes a charming and urbane couple she knew during the war who collaborated with the Nazis. "And I, two years after the war, I was a member of the Communist Party. The parallel is complete

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and absolute. The two things are the same, the same pity, the same call for help, the same lack of judgment, the same superstition, if you like, that consists in believing in a political solution to the personal problem." Duras is quite right in seeing an identity between French Communists and French collaborators: both were accomplices to a murderous foreign power. But in reducing this complicity to its psychological causes or to appealingly waif-like motives, Duras once again skirts the duty of an artist and an intellectual to answer for his ideas and what comes of them. To this picture of an artist-intellectual as a cuckoo hatching young that others must cope with, one might usefully compare that of a Czechoslovakian novelist raised under Communism. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* Milan Kundera reminds us through his hero that Oedipus Rex, on learning that he had unwittingly killed his own father and slept with his mother, put out his own eyes and became a wandering beggar. A similar demand of consciousness, writes Kundera, is placed upon an intellectual who from whatever noble or sympathetic motives has wished upon his country a murderous and tyrannical political system and lives to see what he has done. This fidelity to consciousness, one of the hallmarks of the serious artist, contrasts dismally with those twin demons of narcissism and self-ignorance that dance attendance on even the most elegant of Duras's fiction, and leave her a purveyor of pretentious and empty fancies.

Unlike everyone else

Joseph Brodsky Less Than One.
Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 501 pages, $25

reviewed by Robert Richman

Less Than One is the first collection of prose writings by the forty-six-year-old Russian émigré poet Joseph Brodsky, who has lived and worked in New York City since his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1972. Judging from some of his remarks here, it isn't surprising that Brodsky hasn't issued a volume of his prose before. For Brodsky considers prose to be distinctly inferior to poetry. Whereas the latter, as Brodsky says in his essay on Osip Mandelstam, "is an extremely individualistic art," a poet's "turning to prose," as he writes elsewhere, may be "a kind of literary *nostalgie de la boue,* a desire to merge with the (writing) mass, to become, at last, 'like everyone else.'" This fear of conformity helps explain the style of *Less Than One.* The difficult transitions and unexpected turns of thought are Brodsky's way of making prose—"that *a priori* 'normal' form of communication with a reader"—into something uniquely his own. Here is a typical paragraph from the essay entitled "Flight from Byzantium":

> Any movement along a plane surface which is not dictated by physical necessity is a spatial form of self-assertion, be it empire-building or tourism. In this sense, my reason for going to Istanbul differed only slightly from Constantine's. Especially if he really did become a Christian—that is, ceased to be a Roman. I have, however, rather more grounds for reproaching myself with superficiality; besides, the results of my displacements are of far less consequence. I don't even leave behind photographs taken "in front of" walls, let alone a set of walls themselves. In this sense, I am inferior even to the almost proverbial Japanese. (There is nothing more appalling to me than to think about the family album of the average Japanese: smiling and stocky, he/she/both against a backdrop of everything vertical the world contains—statues, fountains, cathedrals, towers, mosques, ancient temples, etc. Least of all, I presume, Buddhas and pagodas.) *Cogito ergo sum* gives way to *Kodak ergo sum,* just as *cogito* in its day triumphed over "I create." In other words, the ephemeral nature of my presence and my motives is no less absolute than the physical tangibility of Constantine's activities and his thoughts, real or supposed.

Brodsky's wish to avoid being "like everyone else" isn't gratuitous. It has its source,

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we learn from the autobiographical essays here, in his childhood in postwar Russia. "Whatever there was in plentitude," recalls Brodsky of his early years, whatever "bore a suggestion of repetitiveness became compromised." What was most plentiful in Soviet Russia, of course, was the image of Lenin. "I think that coming to ignore those pictures [of Lenin] was my first lesson in switching off, my first attempt at estrangement." So estranged from the world did Brodsky become that his "history of consciousness," as he calls it, doesn't begin with the facts of his life, but rather with his "first lie" against the state: namely, the concealment of his Jewish identity on a library-card application. Even today he has difficulty accepting the validity of his birth certificate.

It's no surprise that the modern Russian poets Brodsky admires most are those who, like him, responded to political oppression with a deeply personal poetry. "Song is, after all, restructured time," says Brodsky, and restructured time is an affront to contemporary tyrannical societies which, as he states in the essay "On Tyranny," attempt to "structure . . . your life for you." The love poetry of Anna Akhmatova is admired for repudiating the "stampede of history" under Stalin, and for expressing a "nostalgia for the infinite" in a country where the infinite was decidedly out of favor. The poetry of Osip Mandelstam was also a "form of linguistic disobedience" against the "iron broom" of Stalin's state, while Eugenio Montale's poetry was a "linguistic self-defense . . . against Fascism." Of course, Brodsky doesn't believe that only the politically oppressed write good poetry. The love poetry of Constantine Cavafy wasn't written in political circumstances of this sort, but it offers a similar "alternative form of existence." As Brodsky says in his essay on Cavafy, "The more squalid and desolate the place, the stronger one's desire becomes to enliven it."

Brodsky sees poetry in ethical as well as aesthetic terms. Montale's switching from rhymed to unrhymed verse within the same poem is not just a way of varying the music of the poem; to Brodsky (as well as to Montale) it's also an appeal for a balance of power. Brodsky's discussion of rhymes in the remarkable essay on Auden's "September 1, 1939" also takes on a deeper significance: "the principle of rhyme that enables one to sense that proximity between seemingly disparate entities," as Brodsky says, is also an argument against the impulse—so prevalent in totalitarian states—to view humanity as an undifferentiated mass of people. Brodsky uses the same terms to praise the poetry of Derek Walcott. Walcott, we are told, "belongs to no 'school'" of poetry, and has avoided "reductive racial self-assertion, which no doubt would have endeared him to both his foes and his champions." The spectacle of Marina Tsvetaeva's independence from the "(writing) mass" also pleases Brodsky. The purity of her poetic voice, we are told, "was akin to an echo-signal which is sent into mathematical infinity and finds no reverberation, or, if it does, immediately rejects it." This is a statement we could easily apply to Brodsky.

The benefits of isolation and estrangement are perhaps best elaborated in the moving essay on Leningrad entitled "Guide to a Renamed City." "Peter," as Brodsky calls the city, became the "cradle of Russian poetry" in part because architecturally it was a "giant-scale embodiment of perfect order" where the "iambic beat is as normal as cobblestones." But the primary reason literary culture developed in St. Petersburg, Brodsky writes, was the city's special relationship to the rest of the country. Not a part of the Russian land mass and with access to the sea (a symbol of freedom unknown to the vast majority of Russians), it provided the writers who migrated there with the ability to place themselves and their country in perspective: "if it's true that every writer has to estrange himself from his circumstances to be able to comment upon it, then a city, by rendering this alienating service, saved them a trip." In St. Petersburg, "thoughts depart so willingly from reality," and this departure, the author feels, is crucial for the creation of genuine imaginative literature. If

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there's a "downside" to St. Petersburg, it's in the penchant of the city's inhabitants for self-absorption: "The twelve-mile long Neva branching right in the center of town, with its twenty-five large and small coiling canals, provides this city with such a quantity of mirrors that narcissism becomes inevitable."

If St. Petersburg is an ideal place for the artist, Istanbul is, in Brodsky's view, one of the worst. In Instanbul, as the author informs us in "Flight from Byzantium," nothing is indulged—least of all narcissism. To Brodsky, Istanbul stands for everything anti-individualistic—or, to use the author's initial formulation, monotonously repetitive—about the East. "[T]he East means, first of all, a tradition of obedience," says Brodsky, and "no matter what extreme of idealization of the East we may entertain, we'll never be able to ascribe to it the least semblance of democracy." Brodsky attempts —successfully, it seems to me—to demonstrate how the Byzantine principle of ornamentation reflects the culture's anti-individualism. The Eastern emphasis on space over time suggests the same anti-individualistic bias. Space, which Easterners experience most vividly, is a *thing,* says Brodsky. Time, which Westerners are more acutely aware of, is an *idea* about a thing. It presumes the existence of a person who has the ability to conceive of himself as an autonomous being. His counterparts in the East, Brodsky argues, are less capable of doing this.

"Oh, I foresee objections!" says Brodsky. But the indictment continues:

> Today, if a young man climbs up a university tower with an automatic rifle and starts spraying passersby, a judge . . . will class him as mentally disturbed and lock him up in a mental institution. Yet in essence the behavior of that young man cannot be distinguished . . . from the Iranian Imam's butchering tens of thousands of his subjects in order to confirm his version of the will of the Prophet. Or from Dzhugashvili's [Stalin's] maxim, uttered in the course of the Great Terror, that "with us, no one is irreplaceable." The common denominator of all these deeds is the anti-individualistic notion that human life is essentially nothing—i.e., the absence of the idea that human life is sacred, if only because each life is unique.

Is Brodsky a racist? He raises the question himself. He confesses to being a misanthrope and drops the issue. In any event, there's no sidetracking him now. He points out that Eastern traditions are "drastically alien to the principles of a moral absolute, whose role—I mean the intensity of the sentiment—is fulfilled here by the idea of kinship, of family." What Brodsky is saying is that the division of authority between family and church or family and government in many Western countries might conceivably explain why government- or church-sponsored mass murder is relatively rare here. And then of course there's the fact that

> . . . in Athens Socrates could be judged in open court and could make whole speeches—three of them!—in his defense[;] in Isfahan, say, or Baghdad, such a Socrates would simply have been impaled on the spot, or flayed, and there the matter would have ended.

If you think hairs are being split here, Brodsky suggests, you're behaving exactly as your enemies want you to behave. To believe there to be an equivalency between East and West is to play right into their hands. As Brodsky explains it in the very first pages of *Less Than One*:

> Ambivalence, I think, is the chief characteristic of my nation. There isn't a Russian executioner who isn't scared of turning victim one day, nor is there the sorriest victim who would not acknowledge (if only to himself) a mental ability to become an executioner. Our immediate history has provided well for both. There is some wisdom in this. One might even think that this ambivalence *is* wisdom, that life itself is neither good nor bad, but arbitrary . . . . This kind of ambivalence, I think, is precisely that "blessed news" which the East, having little else to offer, is about to impose on the rest of the world. And the world looks ripe for it.

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The prose is characteristically difficult, but the message couldn't be clearer.

If we do choose St. Petersburg over Istanbul, however, we must be willing to tolerate the pervasive narcissism of its inhabitants, especially its writers. In fact, Joseph Brodsky would seem to fit right in. For isn't there a touch of narcissism in his obsessive wish to avoid being "like anyone else"? Isn't there a bit of self-love in his aggressive desire to send an "echo-signal" into "mathematical infinity" only to prove that his voice and his judgments are unique? There certainly is, but for a poet of Joseph Brodsky's quality, this is probably to be expected. *Less Than One* is an important book.

Searching for Dorothy Parker

Leslie Frewin The Late Mrs. Dorothy Parker. Macmillan, 320 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

Dorothy Parker is one of those literary figures who are more famous for being well known than for being a writer, and she is all the more glamorous for having been associated with every glittering myth that exists about the 1920s, the legendary decade of speakeasies, wisecracks, *Vanity Fair,* and "Ain't We Got Fun?" Parker and the Algonquin group tend to be remembered with the kind of second-hand nostalgia one can feel only for those people and periods which one has heard about but never really known. That the Round Table regulars are remembered at all is a measure of the force of their personalities, for it is generally agreed that most of the writers among them produced little of lasting quality. Parker, despite her delicate literary reputation, was the most capable of the group.

Writing about Dorothy Parker in his notebooks from the Twenties, Edmund Wilson observed that she "was the only personality who interested me in this group . . . . She was naturally spontaneously witty, and the conflicts in her nature made her interesting." While Wilson did not go on to define those conflicts, he pointed to Lillian Hellman's portrait of Parker in *An Unfinished Woman,* which he said is "unlikely to be bettered by anyone else." Hellman agreed with Wilson that "Dottie" was "a tangled fishnet of contradictions," and speculated that her friend's familiar habit of aiming sudden insults at people she seemed to like "came from a desire to charm, to be loved, to be admired, and such desires brought self-contempt that could only be consoled by behind-the-back denunciations of almost comic violence."

Whatever Parker's secret desires may have been, it seems certain that much of her behavior originated in a fragile sense of self. She became a celebrity suddenly and on the basis of very little accomplishment; by 1919, at the age of twenty-six, she had developed an admiring audience for her brief *Vanity Fair* articles and for a series of verses entitled "Hate Songs"; by 1920, having been fired from *Vanity Fair,* she was famous mainly for her remarks over lunch at the Algonquin.

Parker reacted to fame built upon so unsteady a foundation by behaving in a variety of self-punishing ways. She tended to fall in love with men who did not love her, whom she described as "handsome, reckless, and stupid." Although she claimed to want to write as seriously and fluently as her favorite contemporary author, Ernest Hemingway, she managed to produce very little, publishing only light verse, slight stories, and a scattering of theater and book reviews. In all, she published seven books, the contents of which fit tidily into Viking's 1944 *Portable* edition: *Enough Rope* (poems, 1926), *Sunset Gun* (poems, 1928), *Laments for the Living* (stories, 1930), *Death and Taxes* (poems, 1931), *Not So Deep as a Well* (collected poems, 1936), *Here Lies* (collected stories, 1939), and an omnibus edition of the three poetry books, entitled *After Such Pleasures* (1933).

Significantly, many of Parker's verses dwell upon the smug, adolescent notion of

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neatly taking her own life. She did, in fact, attempt suicide twice; after the second try, Robert Benchley famously warned, "Dottie, if you don't stop this sort of thing, you'll make yourself sick." It is ironic that, for all of Parker's youthful impulses toward self-cancellation, she managed to live to an advanced age, suffering through increasing disappointments and finally through barely tolerable loneliness. She died in 1967 at the age of seventy-three.

The central tragedy of her career was that she continued to live and work long after the milieu in which she had enjoyed her vogue disappeared. Well aware of the drama in her situation, she played this tragedy with enthusiasm in her later years, becoming, according to Brendan Gill, "the guest who is aware that he has outstayed his welcome and who yet makes no attempt to pack his things and go." Toward the end of her life, her brilliant start now a bitter memory, she became an increasingly pitiable figure. In *The Fifties,* Edmund Wilson wrote of her, "She lives with a small and nervous bad-smelling poodle bitch, drinks a lot, and does not care to go out."

Clearly there is much of interest for a biographer to examine in the character of this difficult woman, whose public life has been extravagantly celebrated but whose private contradictions have been imperfectly understood. An intelligent assessment of Parker's status as a writer would be welcome as well. There is some disagreement about the value of her small, eccentric contribution to American letters; while the light verse is effortlessly clever and of limited merit—mere wisecracks that rhyme—the stories are interesting not only for their miniature portraits of Twenties society but also for Parker's unwaveringly cool narration, which bears no trace of self-analysis and is often more studiously concerned with developing an elaborate style than with relating the stories' plots.

Given the abundant and provocative details available about the author's life and work, it is especially disappointing that *The Late Mrs. Dorothy Parker* is a poorly conceived and badly written book. Its author, Leslie Frewin, has published a 1955 biography of Marlene Dietrich and has edited volumes on such subjects as soccer, espionage, and the British Royal Family. In his prologue to this latest effort, he writes that he "has been an intimate party to published literature concerning Mrs. Parker and her familiar Algonquin habitat in those dizzy days of the twenties and thirties," then goes on to assure readers further of his credentials by mentioning those of Parker's contemporaries with whom he has conversed at cocktail parties, in an effort "to skim off facets of her personality." These people include such figures as Robert Mitchum, David Niven, Merle Oberon, and "*soi-disant* contemporary luminaries like Gloria Swanson," all of whom, to be sure, were living at the same time as Dorothy Parker, but who had mystifyingly little else to do with her except to meet her occasionally and hear about her jokes.

At the end of this baffling introduction, Leslie Frewin declares of his subject, "she had a mystery about her; it was, and is, a mystery she cultivated with all the irrelevant innocence which redeemed her days." That Parker remains a mystery at the conclusion of this book is no surprise, for there are a great number of statements as meaningless as this quotation throughout it. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to credit Leslie Frewin with any original perceptions about Dorothy Parker, because he obscures his narrative so thoroughly with his prose style.

Frewin is excessively fond of *Cosmopolitan*-style phrases: "fashionable frolics," "the chanting of Parkerian particles," "the mad twenties whirl," "lazy, sun-drenched days," "diamonds flashing like harbor lights." One cannot help wondering what Parker would have said about Frewin's style, for she was most energetic and surgically precise in ridiculing the trite prose of books she did not admire. Occasionally, among these flamboyant descriptions, Frewin offers ruefully sympathetic observations about the less merry aspects of Parker's life: "They [Parker and

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her first husband] had walked the pitted lanes of love together and had lost their way." "Mrs. Parker had long reached out for happiness, but it had been denied her. Life was a business of constant pain; to survive one had to learn to live with that pain. She had not yet discovered that the destruction of dreams is the foundation of hope."

A superficial style could be considered appropriate if it were the author's intention merely to produce a giddy profile of a popular figure. But Frewin is more ambitious. He tries, with varying degrees of failure, to place Parker within her specific historical context, to search her fiction for clues to her personality, and to uncover the source of her chronic unhappiness. For context, readers are furnished with details about world events as though these were being announced for the first time: "In October 1929, the stock market trembled violently for a nightmare of days and then crashed with a reverbancy that echoed around the world." "On the bright Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, America's antiwar faction was shattered by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor." In describing the circumstances of Parker's childhood and adolescence in Manhattan and New Jersey, Frewin is no smoother in creating a narrative from his outlines and notes; readers are given, for example, much more specific information about the physical characteristics of Parker's boarding school, Miss Dana's School for Young Ladies in Morristown, than about her family's home on West Eightieth Street in Manhattan, only because Frewin apparently had more research material about the school.

Frewin's discussion of the source of Parker's melancholy is especially unsatisfactory. His explanation is no more than a juggling of terms borrowed from psychoanalysis which are themselves extremely vague: ". . . she was assuredly what we know today as a manic depressive, suffering from the first depressive syndrome in the psychiatric book —endogenous depression, endogenous indicating that the trouble is generated from within and not as a result of external misfortune." His observations about her fiction and verse are not especially illuminating, and any merit his opinions may contain is again obscured by his disastrously frivolous style: "But those who study Mrs. Parker's work know that as with much of her frothy light verse, it takes a good deal of heat to make a perfect soufflé. A soufflé is precisely what her story, 'Horsie,' is. It is heated to perfection."

In the end, Frewin's biography, like Dorothy Parker herself, must be regarded as a victim of its own high-spirited irresponsibility and disappointed good intentions. Readers hoping for a substantial, finely tuned study of a complex writer, of which a book such as Elizabeth Frank's recent *Louise Bogan* is representative, will have longer to wait. Frewin states at the end of his book that "Mrs. Parker . . . had spent her life searching for Dorothy Parker. She never found her." Neither, unfortunately, has Leslie Frewin.

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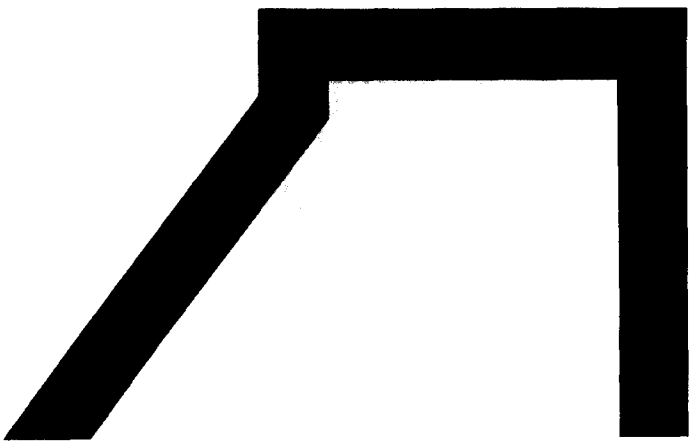

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Letters

Richard Serra

To the Editors:
I recently read Hilton Kramer's article, "Richard Serra at MOMA," in the May 1986 issue of *The New Criterion*. I was pleased to learn that Mr. Kramer was impressed by Richard Serra's work, but I would like to bring to your attention an inaccuracy in the article. The Museum of Modern Art did not acquire, as stated, *Modern Garden Arc*, though it was among the four or five candidates for acquisition. The work we actually acquired was *Circuit, II*. This piece, which was installed in its own room in the galleries, consists of four steel plates, each 10′ x 20′, which emerge diagonally from the four corners.

Laura Rosenstock
Department of Painting and Sculpture
The Museum of Modern Art
New York City

To the Editors:
I have rarely written a letter to the editor of a periodical; however, Hilton Kramer's review of Richard Serra's show at MOMA impels me to do so. He emphasizes several characteristics of Serra's work on aesthetic and related psychological grounds. To quote: "the specific space in which it is erected must henceforth be regarded not merely as the circumstantial conditions of the work's realization but as essential defining aspects of its artistic existence." Further, Mr. Kramer describes "an element of dread or what might even be called fear" which he finds to be a new experience for his viewing of sculpture. He goes on to say that "these sculptures occupy the museum's spaces with an authority which is all but indistinguishable from a certain mode of aggression." He describes the sculpture as dividing "the space in such a way as to hold us captive, direct[ing] our vision, and control[ling] our movements as a condition of seeing the work at all." All of which was a new experience for him.

I have quoted Mr. Kramer at length because I am surprised that, with his long experience of contemporary art and his astute critical evaluation of it, he has forgotten a work which evoked the same responses in the same terms from his colleagues and the public when they walked through it at the Whitney Museum in 1961. I am referring to the *Sculpture to Create an Environment*, for which I was commissioned in 1960 through the efforts of the curator Jack Bauer and of which Mr. Kramer must have been aware. It was installed in four other museums as part of a retrospective of my work curated by Wayne Andersen.

The terms "fear," "aggression," and "threatening," which were used in response to my work, are echoed in Mr. Kramer's description of Serra's work. Although "site specific" was not a current designation then, I and others published articles describing the "interdependence of the sculpture and the space it animates." I emphasized in written and spoken statements that one without the other would be meaningless. I described the audience as being "captive" and said that it was a unique experience to be engaged in that way.

Many maquettes and drawings preceded the Whitney commission in the years 1958 to 1960.

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My ideas were not well received by architects, or by the public, with the outstanding exception of Rene d'Arnancourt, who offered to put such a work in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art and who went to see the Whitney work at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where it is now permanently installed. His untimely death prevented another commission he had planned. The "cultural bureaucrats" and "bourgeois collectors" were not available then to make a "darling" of me. No other commissions materialized and my lectures at universities were received as the dreams of a "radical."

Herbert Ferber
North Egremont, Massachusetts

The Boucher exhibition

To the Editors:

I am most grateful for Dan Hofstadter's generous remarks about my part in writing the catalogue of the *François Boucher* exhibition in his perceptive article upon Diderot's stance towards Boucher and Chardin. Could I, however, correct the record by pointing out that I was only one of the four co-organizers of the exhibition, which was conceived and brough to fruition by J. Patrick Marandel of the Detroit Institute of Arts?

Alastair Laing
London, England

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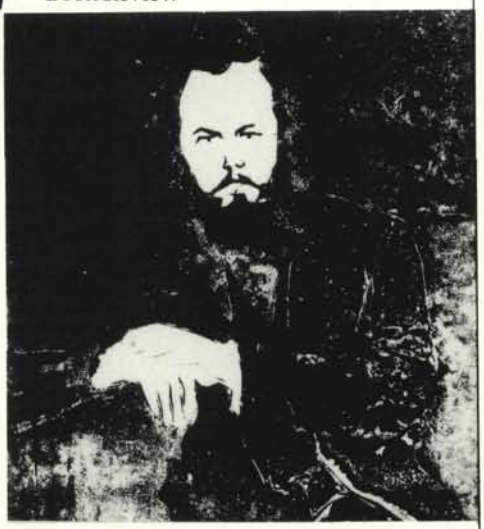

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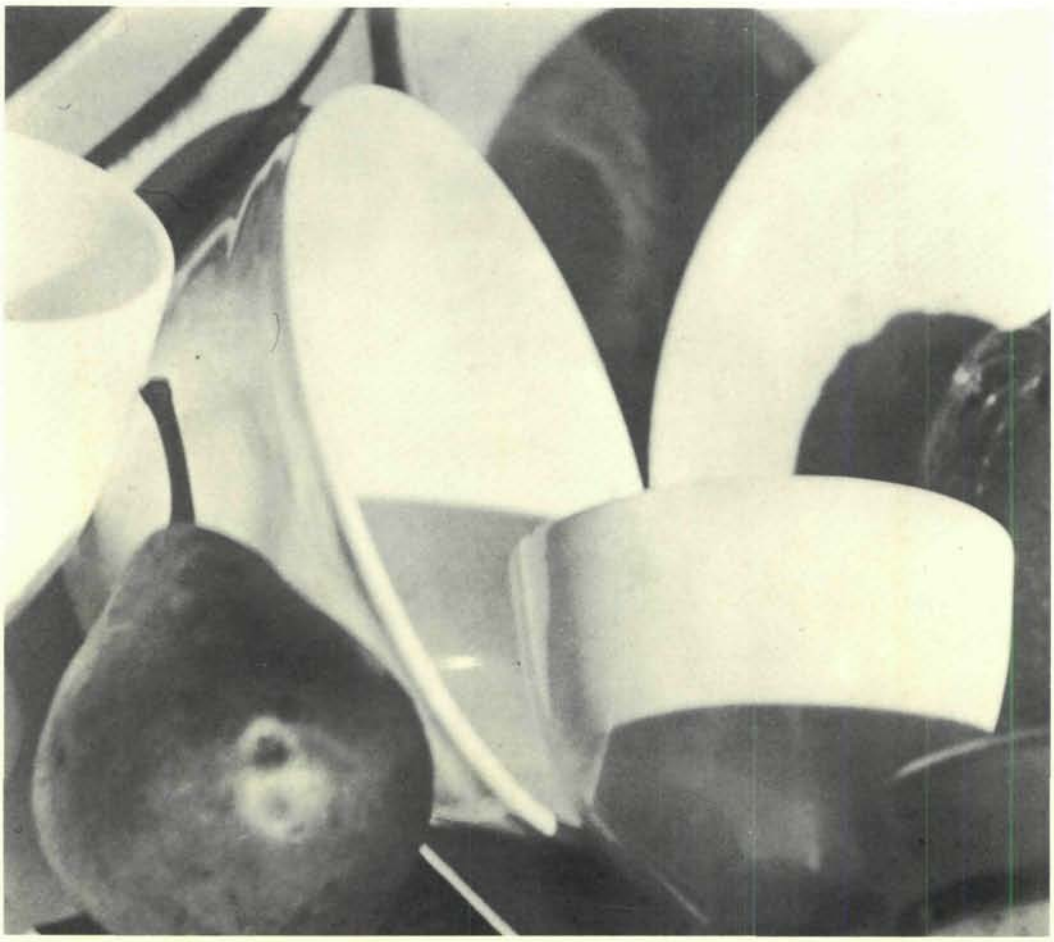

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